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ABSTRACT

This handbook suggests ways for parents to help improve the achievement of their middle school-age children. A general introduction discusses the development of 10- to 14-year-olds and ways parents can help these children reach their potential. Chapter 1 begins with a description of middle schoolers and changes in their growth, the way they act with friends and family, their feelings, and their learning. In chapter 2, parents are reminded that the middle school years are a critical time for students to use and refine basic skills and learn how to solve problems. Chapter 3 describes ways schools are organized for 10- to 14-year-olds, and discusses size, teaching, atmosphere, and understanding of students at the best middle schools. Chapter 4 helps parents evaluate their child's middle school and offers suggestions for working in a group to improve the school. Chapter 5 reminds parents of the importance of involvement in their child's education. Chapter 6 identifies barriers to parent involvement in the schools. Chapter 7 lists negative practices parents may encounter in middle schools. Step-by-step instructions for insuring that one's child receives fair treatment are provided. Additional resources and organizations are listed, as are promising programs in middle schools. (RH)

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The Middle School Years

A Parents' Handbook

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How to Use This Handbook

This handbook has been written to suggest ways every parent can help improve the achievement of their middle school-age children. Because every child is different, this booklet provides a general introduction to how 10-to 14-year-olds develop and how parents can help them reach their potential. Readers are encouraged to learn more about early adolescence and their schools by reading the additional materials suggested at the end of each section.

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Our book begins with a description of middle schoolers and the changes in their growth, in the way they act with friends and family, in their feelings and in their learning.

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Quality education now will be the key to obtaining good jobs over the next two decades. Parents are reminded that middle school is a critical time for students to refine and use basic skills and to learn how to solve problems. Those who fall behind are at increased risk of dropping out before high school graduation.

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Here we remind you how important your involvement is for your child's education. Even if you cannot go to school very often, we list some simple things you can do at home and ways you can keep up with what goes on in school. Seldom is involvement actively encouraged by schools in the middle grades. We discuss why this is so and why schools and parents sometimes blame each other for being "hard to reach."

Today's Families: Why Parent Involvement May Be Difficult.....61
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Who Are These Young People We Will Be Talking About?

They are wonderful.
They are scary.
They have a particular outlook on the world.
They are adventuresome.
They are cautious.
They try on styles of behaving and dressing.
They want to be independent but, in spite of what they say, they need their parents more than ever.
Most of all, they are special.
They will never be this age again.
We ought to be thoughtful, informed, supportive.
We ought to make the most of this time--for them and for ourselves.

They Are Middle Schoolers

So you have a 10-to 14-year-old in your household. Congratulations. The next few years of your life will be filled with concerns about the most active, rambunctious, loving, self-absorbed, scared, (and scary) group of kids around. They love to eat your food but complain about your cooking. They crave your attention yet complain that you are watching them too closely. They tell you terrible jokes then criticize your sense of humor. If their hair is straight, they want it curly; if they are short, they want to be tall; if they are tall, they complain that they are not like the other children. One day, they eat anything that they can find, and the next day, they complain about their school's pizza, your chicken, and the way everything in the refrigerator "tastes funny." They must have a certain shirt or pair of shoes, and--after you have struggled to find a way to purchase these items--they abandon them in the lunchroom, at the corner store, or under their bed.

What a dilemma! No matter what happens with these young adolescents, something is always wrong. The loving, responsive, responsible youngster you knew only a few years ago has turned into this moody, forgetful, irresponsible, impolite, loud dynamo. He eats your food, dominates your

telephone, requires more of a wardrobe than anyone else in the family, demands your attention constantly, and also insists on being left alone.

What Is "Normal" Behavior in this Age Group?

Many of the contradictions, contrasts and conflicts you see in your young teenager and pre-teenager are quite normal.

As they grow, they are experiencing changes on all fronts: in the way they learn, feel, look and deal with other people. These major changes, along with the pressures of today's society, place most early adolescents under a great deal of stress.

There is no "typical" middle schooler; every child remains an individual with strengths, weaknesses, attractive and irritating qualities, but watch for some common traits as your child enters the middle school years:

Middle schoolers are self absorbed--It is important for middle schoolers to find out who they are and what they can do, separate from their families. At the same time they are most interested in themselves, they are also very occupied with their friends, so they are open to pressure from the group. A delicate balance must be struck between honoring the importance of their friends and asserting our adult responsibilities. In other words, we have to acknowledge that their friends are truly important, but we must make certain that we do not allow their friends to control their behavior.

Parents of young adolescents worry that they will reject family moral and social values. Often their behavior suggests that they are questioning everything from religion to table manners. This fear is especially strong among Hispanic, Asian and other families new to this country. Parents see their children living by one set of standards at home and another at school and with their friends. This can cause conflicts at home and at school. The middle school-age child from a different culture has a doubly hard time developing her own identity and meeting expectations of parents *and* teachers.

A twelve year-old once remarked, "I would like to be able to fly if everyone else did; otherwise, it would be rather conspicuous."

What a shame. The twelve-year-old would rather not fly than to stand out from her crowd. To middle-level youngsters, everything would be just fine if only they could have the right clothing, hairstyle, and party invitations. They still have individuality, but they must not be separated too far from the crowd. In time, they will value individuals and recognize their personal accomplishments. For the moment, however, ***to be different is difficult.***

The high energy/low energy cycle--Early adolescents have a great deal of physical and emotional energy and they are capable of being very productive. But they also have periods of unproductive behavior as far as adults can tell. They lounge around for hours listening to music, they sulk in their bedrooms, they "hang out" with their friends doing nothing.

Adults may fear the high energy level of these youngsters. Sometimes they seem to be almost frantic. On the other hand, adults resent the "laziness" that they see and urge their youngster to be doing something. To the adult, the youngster's behavior is out of line. To the youngster, however, it appears that "nothing I ever do is right."

Risk-taking--This is a time in their lives when they feel almost immortal. Although they worry about what their friends are going to think about them, and about who is going to say what about them at the cafeteria table, they don't believe that they are physically in much danger in the world. We know better, and worry a lot about their physical safety.

Traits Common in Middle School-Age Children

- a high level of emotional and physical energy combined with long periods of "hanging out," and doing nothing productive by adult standards
- indulging in risk-taking behavior yet having feelings easily hurt
- a desire to be more independent from families and at the same time, a need to be nurtured and protected
- being self-absorbed and craving privacy, together with great concern about being accepted by the group
- demanding privileges but avoiding responsibility, at the same time they are developing a deep concern about social issues and others

Since one of their "growing up" tasks is to become individuals, separate from their families, they often get into risk-taking behavior. We know that this has the possibility of getting them into trouble as well as the potential to help them learn to face the world as mature adults.

Once again, we face a dilemma: how can we help them take the risks they must without encouraging dangerous--even life-threatening - behavior?

For most of us, risk-taking at age twelve or thirteen meant using an occasional bad word, perhaps smoking a cigarette, misbehaving in school. These days, however, risk-taking might involve experimentation with drugs, sexual activity for which they are not emotionally or intellectually prepared, or anti-social behavior like shoplifting or vandalism which leads to trouble with the law.

Super-sensitive--Children who have had friends since kindergarten often find that these friends have deserted them by the time they are in the seventh grade. Many youngsters cannot understand why long-term relationships are coming to an end, and they see themselves as unattractive or unworthy. Sometimes, they feel that nothing is permanent and that no one can be counted on. At the same time, they feel they don't have the skills they need to survive on their own. They sometimes get upset and depressed about having to rely on friends (and adults) in whom they feel little trust.

The "useless" age--Ours is the only society in history that has created a

group of people for whom we have absolutely no use -- early adolescents. Even though they need to be needed, we no longer rely on them to help us in our homes, our stores, and our community. Laws prevent teenagers from obtaining jobs before age 14. Our society "protects" young adolescents from work, and yet we expect them to be productive.

When they try to do mature things, we tell them that they are "too young"; when they act their age, we tell them to stop "behaving like children." Remember what it was like when you were twelve? Today's technology has made youngsters this age feel even less valuable than in previous generations.

How Middle Schoolers Grow

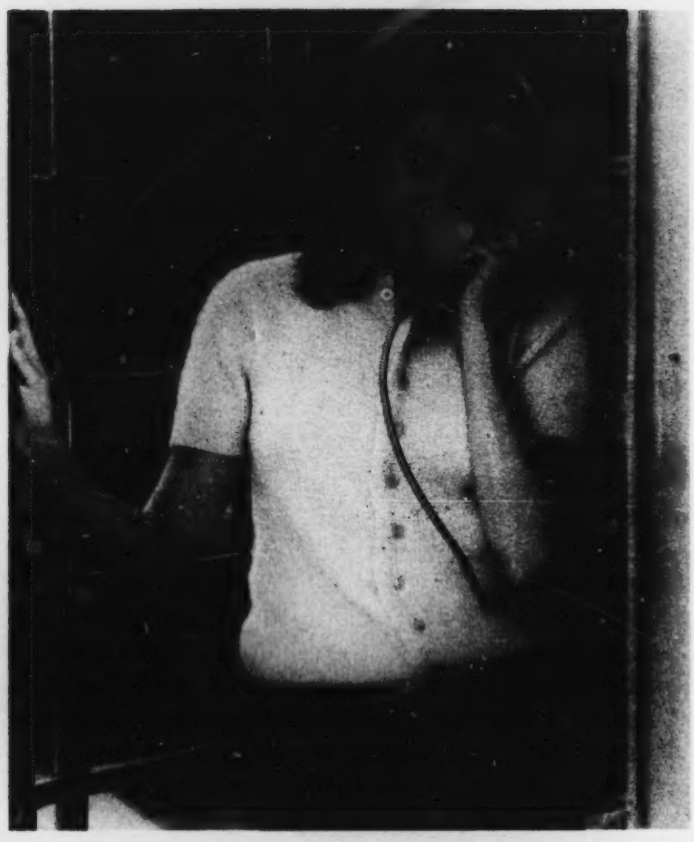
Feelings

Children this age have difficulty controlling their emotions. Sometimes they have outbursts of crying, fighting or even swearing at inappropriate times. They are usually embarrassed by these episodes, but they won't admit it. Somehow, they feel honor bound not to admit any wrongdoing.

In addition, they have emotional concerns about their body changes. They are confused about what is happening to them physically, so they tend to react very strongly to anything that has to do with their sexual growth. It is strange, but they tend to get just as embarrassed about maturing too quickly as they do about growing too slowly.

Children this age worry a lot about schoolwork, tests, and report cards. Along with their worrying, however, they often take an "I don't care" attitude which makes it seem as if they truly are not concerned; in most cases, however, this is just a way that they defend themselves by pretending that things that mean a lot to them really don't matter so much.

Children between the ages of 10 and 14 have a lot of anxiety, are easily angered, and take longer to recover from emotional outbursts than when they were younger. They are trying to figure out who they are, and they don't much like the looks of the person they see in the mirror.



Getting Along with Others

This is the time when children become very concerned with the standards set by their friends. They show independence in their choice of friends and are very loyal to their group. When parents are unhappy about their friendships, children this age may insist on their right to choose the people with whom they are going to associate, and they frequently change friends depending on pressures from different groups and their shifting interests, needs, and wishes.

Although the herd instinct is strong at this age, it is not unusual for a child to feel that he or she has no friends. Feelings of being excluded may disappear with the next phone call or may continue and cause a child to be withdrawn and sad, or to act out and be aggressive. Some children this age find it hard to make friends because they are shy or look or act different from most of their classmates. Parents can help with friendships by encouraging a child to join groups where everyone enjoys the same activity and by welcoming another youngster over to spend the night, to cook, or just do homework with your child.

These children are beginning to exert their own independence by breaking away from some parent controls. They are often critical toward home, their parents, and society in general. At about age thirteen, many of these youngsters appear to be indifferent to adults--especially teachers and parents. They are more concerned with presenting a positive image toward their friends than they are toward adults. This

doesn't mean that they don't still love and need you. They just have difficulty expressing it.

At this time of life they have a growing interest in privacy. They crave time alone, to balance the time they spend with their friends. Some of this probably has to do with their need to "think things through" and also to explore aspects of their own sexual growth.

Beginning at about age eleven or twelve, early adolescents spend a lot of time on the telephone, having "important" conversations with their friends. They are beginning to show interest in the opposite sex, which in the earlier years takes the form of teasing. Actually, many of them are quite fearful of society's expectations for sexual roles and socializing.

An exciting social growth that takes place at this time is their ability to work in teams. They like to do things as a group, to produce their own comic books, to make music, to sing together, to do line dances, and to begin having parties together. Much of the relating between the sexes is still tentative; but interest is growing.

Physical Growth

Many girls, beginning at age ten, show a rapid increase in weight. As they mature sexually, their bodies get back into proportion.

Boys often display awkwardness, restlessness, and "laziness" as a result of their uneven growth.

Both sexes are often quite willing to work hard at acquiring physical skills like dancing or skate boarding, but they also are very self-conscious about their bodies and their awkwardness.

At about age eleven or twelve they begin to show signs of growth in their secondary sex characteristics, such as developing breasts and pubic hair. They are excited about this, but are also somewhat self-conscious. While they are anxious to have this obvious growth, they also have difficulty in accepting their body changes. They also are beginning to get very nervous about their physical attractiveness to others,

and spend a lot of time worrying about their hair and their complexions.

Children this age begin showing an increased appetite. Even though they understand about nutrition, they tend to indulge in a lot of "junk food," regardless of parental warnings.

Children at about age twelve begin to experience periods of extreme fatigue and are reluctant to admit it. Simultaneously, they get restless and have great bursts of energy.

Children's bones and muscles grow at different rates of speed during early adolescence, and this makes it difficult for them to sit still for long periods of time. ***They actually do have "growing pains."*** This is one of the reasons why they take such strange positions while reading, socializing with friends, or talking on the telephone. It's also one of the reasons they find opportunities--at school or at church--to get up and walk around.

Learning

Younger early adolescents (ten-and eleven-year-olds) are often not as organized as they were in elementary school. The basic skills that they learned earlier, at home and at school, need to be repeated and reinforced. Things don't make a lot of sense to youngsters this age, because they still see facts and ideas in isolation. For instance, they may remember the battle of Gettysburg but find it difficult to understand how intelligent people in both the North and the South thought their side was right in the Civil War. Although they are beginning to develop

their reasoning skills, they still act unreasonably. This is why it is so important for them to begin to understand how to make decisions.

Early adolescents tend to develop an interest in "heroes," often entertainers or sport figures. Their dreams of glory usually have more to do with public appreciation and approval of these people rather than their real accomplishments. Probably a lot of this is connected with the children's own feelings of inadequacy. They may also choose a public figure whose standards are much different from your family's, earning your disapproval.

Although they are still reluctant to get very involved with grown-ups, they do like to discuss their experiences with adults--particularly those outside of their homes. This is when aunts, uncles, older brothers and sisters, and especially teachers become extremely important in the lives of these youngsters.

Thirteen-and fourteen-year-olds begin to see relationships among similar ideas and concepts and experiences. By seventh and eighth grade, children begin to assume personal responsibility for their own learning and, although their interests come and go, this is a time in their lives when they begin making important decisions about careers, behavior, and their own intellectual worth. They are easily discouraged if they don't achieve their aims, and this is too bad because they have so many projects that don't come out as wonderfully as they had planned.

Values

Early adolescent youngsters are trying to find their own values, separate from those held by their families. This does not necessarily mean conflict; however, it often means a testing of boundaries.

Parents and teachers are very aware that almost every day will bring some kind of a battle of wills--sometimes these are about bedtimes, parties, curfews, language, or rules; sometimes, these have to do with ridicule of the family or schools' beliefs. Adults' standards for behavior are often ignored, defied, or questioned.

Children at this age begin to have real conflicts about right and wrong. They are not used to making difficult choices, and they have a hard time understanding "shades of gray." This is why a simple "yes" or "no" is much easier for them to take than a "maybe." A "no" allows them to feel that everything else is open to discussion; "maybe" just leaves them confused.

Youngsters at about age twelve or thirteen like to experiment with different attitudes, beliefs, and emotions. They often are interested in the religious ideas of others, and have a hard time understanding how anybody can believe "something that dumb." They also begin to realize that there is a world out there that is different from their own. Because they are questioning everything about themselves, they also question things which in earlier years they accepted as true.

Children of this age also begin to have very high ideals, and they are looking for love (as advertised on TV), beauty (as seen in teen magazines), and justice (something which is available to everyone else, but not to them, and certainly not in their families). They are getting better at looking at the world more critically. Unfortunately, they are often not able to be objective about this; they still see everything through the filter of their own personality and their immediate needs.

Because they have confusing feelings about their identities, they often seek a more active religious involvement so that they can establish some sense of belonging to a group and being with people who share the same ideas.

Religion, with its practices and rituals, allows them to feel part of something bigger in life than their own family and neighborhood, and these activities give them a structure through which they attempt to find more meaning to life. It is not surprising that many religions set age twelve or thirteen for youngsters to affirm their commitment. Children at this age are anxious to make a "rite of passage," and want to be accepted as young adults in their community.

Further Reading on Adolescent Development

"Adolescent Development: Myths and Realities," by Joan Lipsitz (from *Children Today*) Center for Early Adolescence, $1.00 plus 10% shipping.

Discusses several negative stereotypes and misperceptions of young adolescents and early adolescent development.

***Changing Bodies, Changing Lives: A Book for Teens on Sex and Relationships*, by Ruth Bell, together with members of the Teen-Book Project, 1980, 242 pages, Random House, New York.**

Chapter II, "Changing Relationships," includes a description and discussion of the changes which take place in early adolescence concerning how young people feel about their parents and their friends.

***Growing Up Forgotten: A Review of Research and Programs Concerning Early Adolescence*, by Joan Lipsitz, 1980, 267 pages. Lexington Books. Available from the Center for Early Adolescence.**

This book was one of the first to review the research on young adolescent development and analyze how this age group may be affected by societal forces in their lives.

***Listen to Us!* The Children's Express Report, Edited by Dorriet Kavanaugh, 1978, 255 pages. Workman Publishing, 1 West 39 Street, New York, NY 10018.**

Children, ages 7 to 13, candidly discuss their feelings about their families, school, sex, lack of respect for children, and other topics.

"The Teacher in the Middle School," by Vince Lawrence, The Early Adolescence Magazine (T.E.A.M.), January 1988.

Vince Lawrence provides a detailed breakdown of characteristics of middle school students in this article. He lists emotional, social, physical, and intellectual characteristics by age, 10-11 year olds, 12 year olds, and 13-14 year olds.

***The Teenage Survival Book*, by Sol Gordon, 1981, 149 pages, Times Books, Three Park Ave., New York, NY 10016.**

Realistic, entertaining, and insightful "self-improvement" book for adolescents. "This book does not pretend. It acknowledges the pain of the real world, but it also says that: Optimism is easier than pessimism. Wisdom, daydreaming, and risk-taking introduce you to options that you never felt possible."

***Understanding Early Adolescence: A Framework*, by John P. Hill, 1980, 52 pages, Center for Early Adolescence.**

A comprehensive look at early adolescent development; includes an annotated bibliography of references

***Your Ten-to Fourteen-Year-Old*, by Louise Bates Ames, et. al.,1988, 246 pages, Gesell Institue of Human Development**

Devotes a chapter to each year in the 10-14 age span, giving a profile and traits of children. Also looks at trends toward maturity, self care and routines, emotions, relations with others, interests and activities, and school-related problems.

For the addresses of organizations which have published some of these materials, turn to page 87.

Straight Talk for Parents:
Preparing your Child for the 21st Century

Your youngster will never be middle school age again. This is his or her only time to experience the social, educational, and emotional growth that takes place during these years. Becoming involved in your child's education at this age can be a big job, but well worth it. Paying attention to your child's education now can help ensure your child has opportunities for growth and future education he or she will need to be a successful, happy adult.

Our children are the adults of the next century, and the jobs that will await them will not be those which exist today. In order to be successful in the decades to come, today's middle school students will need to know how to use technology, how to operate computers to get and use information, and how to solve problems we haven't even thought of. It does not matter whether these children will be working in supermarkets, offices, universities, or factories. They will need to understand and use much more complicated tools than we do.

One estimate says that new jobs available in the next 20 years will require an average of 13.5 years of schooling--more than a high school education. Jobs for less well educated workers are already declining as machines take over tasks once performed by people, and as the U.S. economy moves away from factory to service industries. Poorly educated workers earn less money, receive less on-the job-training and are the last to be

hired and the first to be fired. These trends are expected to increase in coming decades.

As parents you can make certain that your children are trained to live in the twenty-first century. That is what they need.

The middle school years, ages 10-14, are a critical time for your child to learn and to *like* school. These school years are especially important because a student who falls behind classmates or who becomes bored with schoolwork may never regain an interest in school.

Educators believe that the seeds for dropping out in high school are planted during the middle school years. In a government-funded survey the most frequent reason given by dropouts for leaving school was that they did not like school, but the characteristic most strongly associated with early school leaving is being behind in grade level. The relationship between the two is easy to see. A child who is not performing as well as other students will not like herself or school very much. Of the students who fail to graduate with their class, fewer than one half will eventually get their diploma and fewer still will begin the college or advanced training they will need to obtain good jobs--so you can see why learning in middle school and enjoying school at this age are very important.

Making a good middle school adjustment is especially critical for some minority students. By age 11, 44% of Black boys and 26% of Black girls have repeated one or more grades. The figures for Hispanics are 38% boys retained and 32% girls. Predictably, being overage for their grade leads to high numbers of dropouts. The Census Bureau reports 35% of Black students and 45% of Hispanics fail to complete high school by age 19. In our cities, as many as half of the minority students drop out between middle school and age 18. These figures are disturbing but increasingly, educators are coming to understand that successful dropout prevention needs to start in middle school or earlier.

After the fourth grade a child should have basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills. Children who enter middle school without these basic skills will not be able to take advantage of challenging courses that lead to college

preparation in high school. Middle school may be the last opportunity to catch up on poor language and math skills, and parents should insist that students receive the strong support they need. If they do not catch up to classmates by age 14 or 15, one in five students with weak academic skills will leave school within two years.

Building on a foundation of reading, writing and arithmetic skills, middle school students **learn how to learn.** During the middle school years, students are taught to think problems through and solve them. They also learn to take responsibility for their own school assignments and work in teams with other students.

These are the skills that result in "flexible" learners. Flexibility is the quality most needed to succeed in high school, college and in the job market of the twenty-first century. Memorizing facts and learning specific job skills will no longer be enough. Workers of tomorrow will know how to find answers to questions and confidently undertake on-the-job training to learn a new skill.

Most of us want our children to lead better lives than we have had. This is becoming more difficult in a world where the gap between the poor and the wealthy is growing. The best gift we can give our children is the gift of education. It will open the doors for them to have more choices in their future. A few minutes a day, a few hours a month, a few days a year, on the part of parents supporting and monitoring their child's education will pay off in the future.

What *Is* a Middle School?

We refer to middle schools as being any grouping of grades which serves youngsters between the ages of 10 and 14. Sometimes, these start at grade 5 and run through grade 9. Sometimes, they consist only of grades 7 and 8. The usual arrangement, however, is for three grade levels, with grade 8 being the highest. Many people believe that ninth grade is more effective as part of the high school program.

It is highly possible that middle grades students in your district are scattered, with some fifth graders attending middle school and some sixth graders in another part of town in an elementary school building. One recent study has found 30 different grade span arrangements for children in the 10-14 age group. Sometimes children are grouped for educationally sound reasons, and sometimes they are put where the school system has classroom space. Wherever they are, these students should have a program and school environment that is just right for their age group.

Middle schools have a history. At the beginning of this century, many parents and teachers were concerned that children in the middle grades were not receiving the educational attention which was appropriate for their age level. In order to make a special place for young adolescents, a school serving children in grades 7, 8 and 9 was created. This was the junior high school that most of us adults remember well. The goals of junior highs were very similar to the goals of our present middle schools, but somewhere along the line, many (not all) of them lost track of their goal to address the needs of this very special group of youngsters. They became, in fact, "little high schools," and actually brought high school practices down to lower grades. Suddenly, youngsters ages 12 and 13 were coping with social situations like dances and dating, highly competitive sports, and academic programs which did not take into account their intellectual growth.

In the mid 1960's, middle schools--generally comprised of levels six, seven and eight--came into existence to recognize the special needs of this age group. The practices that help children this age learn and enjoy school have been well

The BUG Award

Most middle school youngsters are not motivated by formal honor rolls. They really can't think a full semester in advance. What many teachers have discovered, however, is that frequent rewards are very important to youngsters of middle school age. In one school, for example, teachers have created the BUG Award, which stands for Bringing Up Grades. The teachers have a box of embroidered bugs (beetles, gnats, mosquitos, etc.) which they keep in a box on their desks. Whenever a child has made a significant increase in grades--from a D to a C, or a B to an A--the child is invited to come get a bug and stick it on her or his collar. Even though the children refer to this as "babyish," they seem to love it. They proudly wear their bugs around the school, and are pleased that their teacher has noticed their progress.

established by education research. Still, some school systems understand them better than others.

How about your child's middle school? Is it a place that successfully serves a diverse, active crowd of middle school students? Let's find out.

What Is a Good Middle School Like?

Good middle schools are people, not buildings--Fine middle-level schools are everywhere: in the cities, in the suburbs, and in rural areas. They may be in old buildings, where the passage of time has taken its toll on the structure, but not on the humanity of the environment; they may be in modern, carpeted buildings where the teachers have created a sense of community among the children who go there.

The building is not what is important. The people and their values make the difference: the caring, knowledgeable teachers and parents, who--with intelligence and good humor--design an educational program based on a knowledge of the nature of the children whom they serve, tempered with flexibility and love.

School Climate

Your child's school should feel friendly and inviting when you walk in. Something in the air says, "We are here because we like working with these youngsters, and we want them to feel that this is a safe, friendly, caring place." Educators call this a positive school climate.

Look at the halls and classrooms. The best middle schools explode with examples of students' and teachers' creativity. Drawings, wall murals, projects, and "learning centers" seem to be everywhere. Children have assembled the bulletin boards. Teachers have photographed students who have excelled in their studies or made progress, or exhibited leadership, or contributed energy to the school, and they have posted these portraits where everyone can see them. Every positive act--social, academic, artistic, or athletic--is recognized and valued.

Understanding the Age Group

In really effective middle schools, the principal and the faculty members understand that children have times when they are productive and times when they are not. They will realize that all children don't learn in the same ways, and that the teachers need to vary the way they teach. They will see to it that kids have an opportunity to explore computers, pottery making, archeology, and anything else that interests them in short "mini-courses" scheduled throughout the year. They will not rush to judge a child but will observe them over a long period of time in many different circumstances.

The people in charge will make certain that the children have an active voice in making some of the rules and regulations. They will look for opportunities that allow the children to direct their boundless enthusiasm in positive directions. They will see to it that each instructional session or class provides chances for youngsters to be productive, and they will value the work that the children do.

Effective middle schools know what children 10-14 are like: they use instruction as a chance to lead them toward accomplishing the school's goals. They don't see the children in their care as lost or troubled souls. They see them as treasures, to be watched over, valued, and protected.

Relationships and Teaching Methods

In the hallways of exemplary schools, you will see wonderful relationships: administrators to teachers, teachers to teachers, teachers to students, students to students, and parents to all. In this kind of atmosphere everyone grows to the fullest.

What Is a Learning Center?

It's a place combining an activity for children with questions and research on a subject so that they can learn on their own. A learning center on metrics might ask a child to weigh and measure pizza ingredients, then bake a pie. A learning center on astronomy might provide a telescope, directions for using it, and a list of questions for the student to answer about what he observes in the sky.

The Middle School Teacher

- Involves students in the learning process
- Uses a variety of different teaching techniques
- Provides a positive classroom atmosphere
- Is flexible
- Tries to understand and accept cultural differences
- Has a sense of humor
- Cooperates with other teachers and with parents
- Knows how to communicate with students, parents, and staff
- Accepts a variety of behavior and beliefs in others that differ from his or her own
- Shows a genuine concern for all children and their growth
- Knows the subject matter
- Serves as an advisor to the students in the class, not just as an instructor

(source: "The Teacher in the Middle School," by Vince Lawrence, *The Early Adolescence Magazine (T.E.A.M.)* January 1988)

In good middle-level schools, you can go into the classrooms and find all kinds of different teaching methods. You can listen to teachers and see that they use many different kinds of questions. Sometimes, they will ask the children to remember facts and dates. Sometimes, they will ask the children to imagine "What if..." so that the children are learning to think, as well as to remember. In some classes you will hear teachers asking the children to compare things that they learned today with things that they learned last week, or last month, or last year. In this way, teachers help the children understand the relationship of facts and ideas to each other.

Teachers and Staff

The teachers who work at a middle-level school should be enthusiastic about spending their time with ten to fourteen-year-olds. Ideally, they should have some training and background in working with young adolescents. A big advantage is for some of the staff members to be trained as elementary school teachers, while others have been trained for secondary schools. Workshops or seminars help both groups understand the special needs of young adolescents, giving the school a highly-trained, well-prepared staff.

Teachers should be assigned to teams that meet regularly to discuss the curriculum and the children. The teams should be "interdisciplinary." That means when the social studies teacher is teaching about a particular time in American History, for example, the reading teacher might have the students read in a book which deals with that

period of time, and the English teacher might have the students writing compositions about what it would have been like to live during that time. In this way, students find that the skills and knowledge they learn in one class are valuable in another.

Classroom Control

Another thing to look for in top notch middle schools is that most decisions are made closest to the point of carrying them out. If a child misbehaves, the discipline will be handled by the teachers, rather than by some administrator in an office two floors away. After all, the misbehavior of most middle schoolers is not really terrible; gum chewing, talking out loud, use of "bad" language, or backtalk is best handled by the adults who are right there on the scene when the offense happens.

Children should spend as much time as possible with their instructors in their classes. It just doesn't make sense to have children spending hours "cooling their heels" in the front office while waiting for the vice-principal.

Of course, serious misbehavior needs to be dealt with by the administrators of the school (violent outbursts, carrying weapons, stealing at school, arriving at school intoxicated or under the influence of drugs). Most twelve-year-olds, however, do not do things that fall into that category.

Other decisions teachers can make include the scheduling of their classes, forming the groups that the children are placed in for instruction, and planning the amount of time that is spent on each subject, each day. Teachers are the educational professionals who are closest to your child. People in the front office of the school, on the other hand, are concerned with hundreds of youngsters. They tend to make decisions based on factors other than the specific needs of your child whereas teachers can focus on each child in their care, and can spend the time necessary to group children appropriately for classes.

Giving teachers more control over educational decision-making is a relatively recent movement. It is sound educationally (for the reasons we have just named), teachers are asking for the increased authority, and the concept is

supported by such influential groups as the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy.

Grouping

Grouping is--in itself--a very important topic. Good middle schools do not "track" children. (for more on tracking turn to page 72). After all, we know that they grow and change at different rates. In a tracking system, a child is placed in a certain level of class at the beginning of the year, and rarely leaves that class until June. A child who is in a "low" class at the beginning of sixth grade will probably still be in the same group (with the same classmates) at the end of eighth grade.

In a good middle school, children of varying abilities are taught together as much as possible. When grouping has to occur because of the particular subject being taught (for example, we wouldn't want to have a child who is just learning fractions in the same group as children learning algebra), the classes should be temporary and flexible. When a child has a sudden "breakthrough," he or she should be moved immediately to a different group.

These kinds of decisions should be made by the grade level team of teachers during their regular, daily planning time. Lots of research shows that children who have more difficulty learning do not learn any better when they are grouped together with other slow learners; on the other hand, it has been found that bright children do not learn any less if they are grouped together with some children who are not as capable as they are. Since the world

is made up of all kinds of people with all kinds of abilities, shouldn't school be the same way? It doesn't seem fair to label children as "dumb" or "slow" at age eleven, and then "track" them at a low level for the rest of their school careers.

Course of Study

Middle-level children are not always efficient; many are as untidy and as disorganized in their approach to education as they are to everything else in their lives. The children all want to learn; the problem is they don't always want to learn what the schools want to teach them, or when the schools want them to be taught.

One of the most important characteristics of a good middle school is that all the children have approximately the same course of study. While elective courses make sense for high school students, most middle school students should have math, English, science, reading, and social studies each year. They all have things to learn from each other. In addition, they should all have art, music, industrial arts (or technology education, as some places now call it) and home economics.

These classes should have a course of study which is exciting to the children, engages them in a way that they all participate and which values their productive efforts through projects, plays, filmstrips, posters, and other creative work.

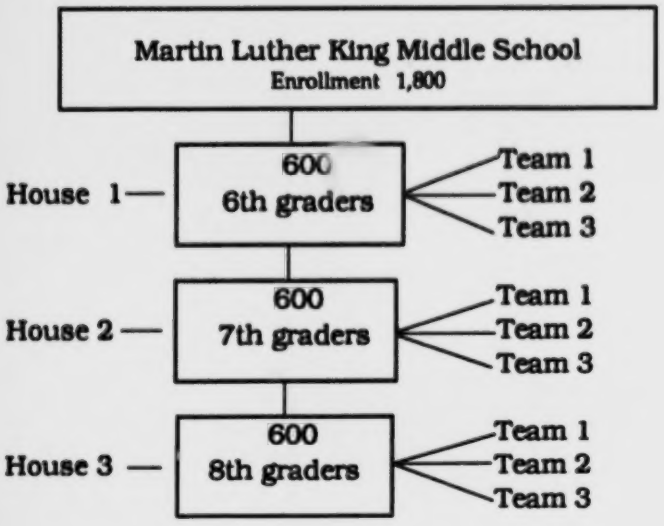
Structure

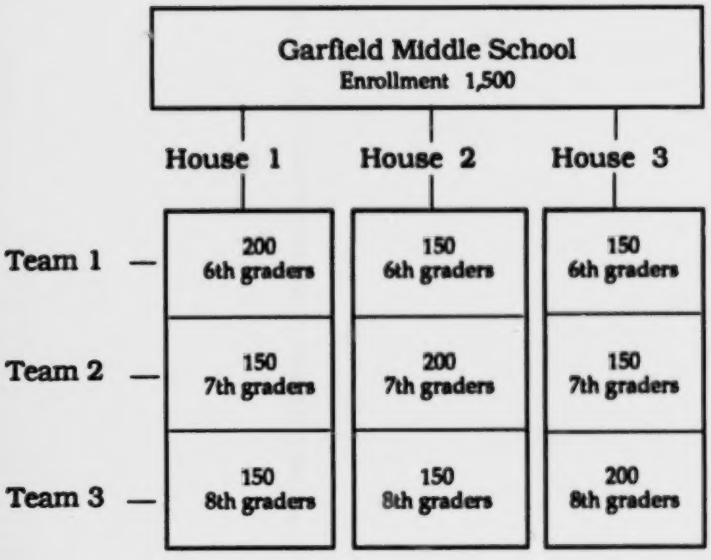
As we have pointed out, it really does not matter whether the building is old or new, "modern" or traditional. The way space is used inside the building is more important. Do the different grade levels have places of their own? Is there a sense of belonging created by the way the space is divided? In effective middle schools, space is used in a way that allows students to have a feeling that "this is our place." This may be very different from the school you attended at the same age.

In many effective middle schools, teachers at each grade level arrange their blocks of time to meet their instructional goals. Only an unusual event (such as lunch) causes all the children at all grade levels to move at the same time. Also, if teachers are flexible in their scheduling, bells are not needed. In fact,

Creating Learning Communities

These diagrams illustrate two ways large middle school buildings may be divided into smaller learning communities.





bells are often disruptive to the learning-teaching partnership.

Size of the School

It really does not matter how large the school building is. The important thing is that small "communities for learning" are developed within it. These might be schools-within-schools, grade-level teams, instructional "houses," or some other arrangement which allows for smallness to be created within the larger population. In general, schools with a total of about 600 students, in grades six, seven, and eight appear to be ideal. In a school of, say, 1,500 students, some kind of arrangement in which three, three-grade communities are created is helpful.

School Administrators

Principals and assistant principals will generally be people who have either elementary or secondary school training. It is important that middle school administrators have a thorough background in understanding the nature and needs of young adolescents. One way to ensure this is to have administrators who participate frequently in local, state, and national middle school conferences and workshops. Dynamic administrators will also encourage teachers to participate in these activities.

Teacher Advisors

Since these youngsters are looking for ways to find out who they are outside of their own families, a good idea is for the school to have some kind of

"teacher-advisory system." This means that each teacher in the school is responsible for a small group of students. Although the program may vary from school to school, generally this teacher serves as the school's main contact person with the home.

When you have a question or a problem, you do not call the principal or the guidance counselor: you call Mary, Tom, or Helen--your child's advisor. The advisor then checks with the other teachers on the team to get the information you need or to share the information you have given, and is able to get back to you by telephone as quickly as possible.

In many schools, this advisor is the person who puts the grades from all the teachers on the child's report card, and has a conference with each child before the report goes home. In most teacher-advisory systems, the group of teachers at each grade level meets regularly with their small advisory classes, and gives the children some instruction on the things that seem important--making and keeping friends, making decisions, solving problems, and learning how to study. In many schools, the advisory groups celebrate each child's birthday, go out (or send) for pizza once or twice a year, and try to create a sense of close-knit support for each child.

Counseling Program

Counselors in the middle school are not like counselors at high schools. They are not involved with job hunting, graduation requirements, or applications for further schooling. In general, effective middle schools have guidance counselors who work with the school administration and the teachers to develop a program which is a reflection of the needs of the school. If the youngsters at the school need work on their study skills, the counselors might design a course of study. If the students are having problems with human relations, the counselors might run workshops.

Counselors will also work with youngsters to help them choose high school courses, to explore the possibilities of different jobs, and to understand the ways that they can use the resources in their communities. Counselors also help parents to understand the school's courses and to assist their children to succeed at school. Counselors often can refer

The MAGIC Bulletin Board

In one school that we have seen, the teachers have created a large bulletin board in their seventh grade area. At the top is "Seventh Grade Magic for This Month." Any child who has done good work, been a good citizen, been helpful around the school, or excelled in any area has his or her photograph taken with the team's instant camera and then is featured on the board as part of the "Magic" of the month. MAGIC, by the way, stands for Making A Great Individual Contribution. Youngsters this age love the recognition. In addition, sensitive teachers send home the child's photograph at the end of the month, with a note to the parent saying, "We are so proud of your child for the contribution which was made to our school community."

Cooperative Baseball

In one school which we observed, the children all take part in a baseball tournament in which points are awarded not only for winning the game, but also for the cooperation which is shown by the students as they play. Children can receive points (awarded by the teachers) for helping each other, using sportsman-like behavior, and exhibiting teamwork.

Sometimes the team that "wins" the game does not win the tournament; children have learned that the school values cooperation, and so it is not unusual at the baseball game to hear these youngsters saying to each other, "Good hit, Mary!" or "Nice try, Tomas!" or "We're proud of you, Maria." The children feel good about participating, everyone feels successful, and important lessons in cooperation have been learned.

parents to community services which might help their families when extra assistance is needed.

This does not mean that the counselors are not available to help children with their individual problems; it does, however, mean that effective middle school counselors spend a lot of time "out in the building," working with teachers and groups of youngsters, rather than sitting in their offices waiting for troubled kids to find them. Most certainly, effective middle schools have counselors who are allowed to do their job; they are not administrative aides to the principal, and they should not be bogged down in paperwork.

Learning Together

In good middle schools, you will see children solving problems together. Since middle schoolers like to talk and work in groups anyway, the best middle schools use teams and cooperative learning projects so that more children are involved with their schoolwork.

In good middle-level schools, much emphasis is placed on participation by everybody, and important decisions are made in a cooperative atmosphere, involving all the teachers, the students, and the parents. Terrific schools are marked by their caring attention to the youngsters, and by their overwhelming concern with the whole school community. Remember, the school community includes you!

Parents

Middle school parents should not be invisible. In effective schools, parents

are involved in many ways. They may serve as part of a school advisory council with teachers, administrators, and sometimes students. They may be active in the budget process of the school or the school system. Frequently, they serve as volunteers in the school (although it is not a good idea to volunteer in your child's classroom). Sometimes, parents find it helpful to be involved with the school's library or media center, to help teachers prepare for programs, or to go with the teachers and children on field trips. Even if you speak little or no English there are ways you can help.

The most important thing, however, is that parents be kept informed by the school about what is going on there, and that parents work in partnership with school personnel to make certain that the school's practices and policies reflect the needs and wishes of the school community. This is especially important in multi-cultural communities.

Educators in effective middle schools welcome and support the involvement of parents in making many decisions. They enjoy having community debate over school programs and practices. They welcome your participation.

School Pride

A final characteristic of a good middle school is that the people who work or go there often think of themselves as a "family." When you talk to them they will describe themselves as "caring about each other." Even though the children may feel a little uncomfortable using such mushy language, they sort of smile when they talk about their school or their teacher, and they generally look forward to going to school. One of the best "tests" of a good middle school is at the end of the year: even though they are excited about the prospect of summer vacation, most of the children will talk about how they miss school, their classmates, and their teachers; at fine middle schools, saying farewell in June is a tearful experience.

Further Reading on Good Middle Schools

***Making Middle Schools Work*, by Jon Wiles and Joseph Bondi, 1986, 95 pages, ASCD, 125 N. West St., Alexandria, VA 22314, $7.25.**

This book may be useful to middle school administrators because it describes a process for designing successful programs, examines the elements of staff training and development needed, and discusses the importance of mechanisms for feedback and evaluation.

***Meeting Adolescent Need: Four Effective Middle Schools*, 1986, 38 pages. Advocates for Children of New York, 24-16 Bridge Plaza South, Long Island City, NY 11101. 718/729-8866.**

A study of four middle schools predominantly serving poor and minority students, which have low rates of absenteeism and high student achievement. The report explains the factors responsible for the success of these schools.

"Middle Schools a Better Match with Early Adolescent Needs, ASCD Survey Finds," by Gordon Cawelti, *Curriculum Update*, November 1988, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. $1.00 and self-addressed stamped envelope.

Reports on a survey of 672 middle schools, covering such topics as guidance services, transition from elementary to middle school, how instruction is organized, teaching strategies, curriculum, and extracurricular activities.

"Middle School: The 'I' of the Storm: Schools that Meet the Needs of Early Adolescence," by William Kerewsky, printed in *International Schools Journal*, Spring 1988.

An historical and philosophical overview of middle schools and what an effective middle school looks and feels like.

"School Environments for Young Adolescents," 1980, 2-fold flyer, Center for Early Adolescence. Part of a 3-pamphlet set, $2.00 plus 10% shipping.

***Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, by Joan Lipsitz, 1984, 223 pages, Center for Early Adolescence. Order from Transaction Books, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903, $15.95.**

Outlines a framework for identifying and examining effective middle-level schools -- one that takes into account adolescent development, school effectiveness research, and public policy concerns. Presents case studies of four successful middle-grade schools that foster healthy social development and academic achievement.

"This We Believe," National Middle School Association, 1982, 19 pages.

A brief summary of the characteristics of early adolescence, the philosophy and concept of the middle school, and the essential elements of a "true" middle school.

***Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, The Report of the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, June 1989, 106 pages, $9.95.**

Discusses the potential role of middle schools as society's most powerful force to assist youth to thrive during early adolescence. Includes recommendations for transforming middle grade schools, and outlines a plan for action.

For the addresses of organizations which have published some of these materials, turn to page 87.

How Parents Can Evaluate and Improve a Middle School

Is your child's middle school a good one? If you read through the characteristics in the previous section, you should be forming an opinion. Perhaps you'd like to conduct a more detailed evaluation of your child's school with an eye to improvement. Many parents do--but they do not do it alone. Thorough evaluation requires observing, interviewing and reviewing school documents. This is best undertaken by a group of interested parents. When parents organize into a group, they can play a major role in bringing about school improvement.

What Parents Expect from Middle Schools

If you have decided to evaluate your school, the first question you will ask is "evaluate for what? What do I expect from my child's school?" Here is a list of some expectations you might have, but we encourage you to add your own concerns to the list.

1. When my child goes to school, more than anything else I want to know that he or she is safe.

2. I want to be sure that my child knows at least one adult well enough to go to for help.

3. I want to know that the school is concerned about helping my youngster develop positive friendships.

4. I expect the school to provide my child with opportunities to get involved in activities.

5. When my child comes home from school, I want to know that he or she has had enough good experiences to want to return the next day.

6. I want to know that the middle school is teaching students what they will need to be prepared for high school.

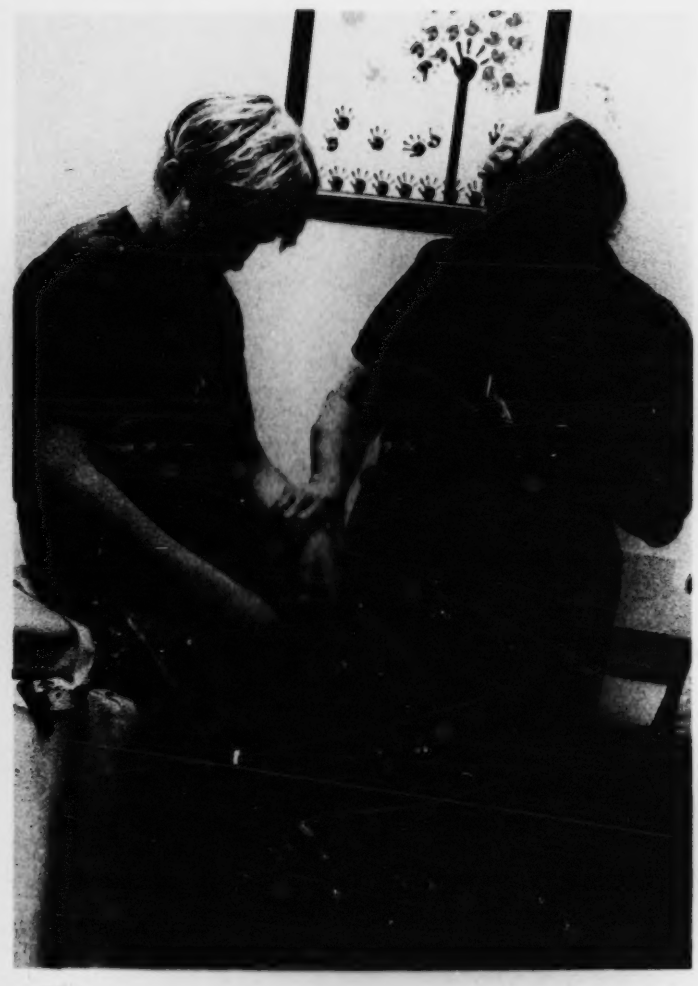
7. I want teachers to keep me informed on my child's progress.

8. When I visit the school, I want to feel welcome.

9. I'd like to know that the school is making every effort to keep parents informed about what to expect from their child during these years.

(Source: "What Parents Expect from Middle Schools," by James P. Garvin, *Principal*, March 1988.)

An Evaluation Checklist



The list above covers a wide variety of factors associated with education, including curriculum, school safety, teacher expectations, and student attitudes. It expresses parent concerns in very general terms. When parents want to get involved and try to determine how their middle school is measuring up to all of their expectations, it is useful to have specific, measurable factors or questions to consider. The list below includes what we have concluded are the most important qualities of an effective middle school. We do not intend the list to be complete or final. If you or your parent group decides to undertake an assessment, evaluation, or audit of the school's effectiveness, you may wish to concentrate on one area and add further questions to the list.

Philosophy of the School

* Does the school have a stated philosophy? Was it written by administrators, teachers, parents, and students?
* Does the school recognize 10-14-year-olds as having unique developmental needs?
* Is the mission of the school more than just one of transition from elementary to high school?

- Are students given an active voice in making rules and regulations?
- Does the school embrace cultural differences among students?

School Climate

- Is the school considered safe for everyone?
- Do students and staff enjoy being at the school?
- Is student work displayed in classrooms, bulletin boards, and hallways?
- Is the school divided into teams or houses so that each student belongs to a small "learning community" not exceeding 600 students?
- Is the school friendly and inviting?

Curriculum

- Does the curriculum include core academic subjects (English, reading, science, math, history), art and life skill classes (including music, shop, gym, and health), and extracurricular activities (clubs and after school athletic programs)?
- Is the curriculum offered in a variety of ways?
- Does the curriculum affirm the cultural roots of all students?
- Are students who speak English as a second language given the assistance they need to achieve as well as other students?

Classroom Instruction

- Do the teachers use hands on learning or a laboratory approach for most of the curriculum rather than presentations and lectures?
- Do students receive a variety of learning experiences within a common curriculum (field trips, projects, papers, oral reports, etc.)?
- Is the schedule flexible, rather than having rigid class periods of 45 or 50 minutes each?
- Does the instruction offer opportunities for students to explore and solve problems on their own?
- Is a high percentage of time spent on learning activities, rather than passing out papers, getting equipment ready, quieting students, or listening to loudspeaker announcements?
- Do the classrooms use a variety of seating arrangements to encourage students to work together?

* Are students encouraged to solve problems together?

Teacher Background and Preparation

* How many teachers have specialized training in working with young adolescents? How many are trained for elementary or high school level teaching only?
* How often do teachers talk to students individually?
* Are teachers prepared to understand and meet the needs of students from different countries?
* Is the teaching staff organized into teams so that teaching is coordinated across several subjects?
* Do the teachers readily praise students?
* Do the teachers encourage students to work together?
* Do teachers meet together at least once a week to talk about how their students are doing?
* Are teachers given the freedom and power to make decisions about instruction in their classroom?

Meeting Student Needs

* Does a teacher-counselor know your child individually and academically?
* Does a guidance counselor speak Spanish or other first language of students to help them feel more comfortable in expressing their problems?
* Do students with special learning needs receive help in a way that does not separate them from their classmates?
* Do students look interested and motivated by classroom activities or do they look bored and slouchy in their seats?

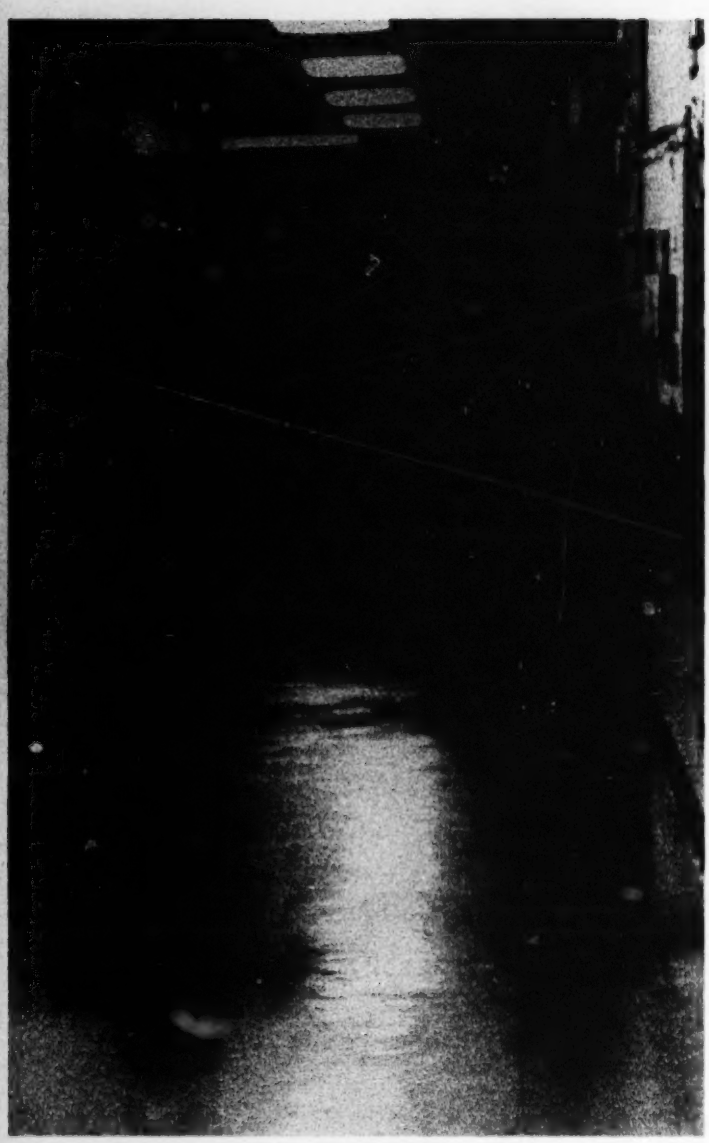
* Do students have the opportunity to talk with adults?

School Policies

* Is misbehavior handled by the classroom teacher or are students sent to the principal's office?
* Are absentee rates among students low (no greater than 10% daily)?
* How many days of sick leave do teachers take each year?
* Is suspension of students a rare practice, occurring only for serious misbehavior?
* Is the school flexible in assigning students to ability groups? Are the assignments to groups short-term and frequently changed?
* Are school discipline policies aimed more at teaching students self discipline than in punishing them? Does the school involve students in developing and reviewing the discipline policy?
* Are discipline policies administered fairly and evenly, or are an unusually high number of suspensions and corporal punishment inflicted on a few students or those from a certain racial, ethnic, or language background?
* If a student fails one subject, are there arrangements for him or her to make up the class without repeating the whole grade?
* Are students with learning problems provided with special help so that they can be promoted and not required to repeat a grade?

Parent Involvement

* Do you feel welcome at the school? (Is there an "adult size" chair for you to sit on and a place to hang your coat?)
* When you call the school is someone available to talk to you?
* If you have limited English skills, does the school provide a translator for parent/teacher conferences?
* Are you informed of school policies and your child's progress in your primary language?
* Is one teacher or counselor easily accessible, to whom you can talk about all your child's classes and progress?
* Does the principal treat parent groups as a help not a nuisance? Are parents provided with information they request?
* Are changes made when parents raise problems or make recommendations?



- Are parents informed regularly about their children's progress or problems?
- Does the school include parents on advisory councils? Are there ways for parents to participate in decision-making ?

First Steps in Evaluating Your Child's Middle School

1. Visit the school to observe in the classrooms, halls, cafeteria, and other facilities.

2. Ask specific questions; know what you are looking for and why; expect concrete and direct answers from school staff. Ask for explanations if you do not understand what you see, hear, and read.

3. Talk to your child in order to learn about his or her experiences at school.

4. Get involved with the PTA, a parent organization, a school advisory committee, or a similar organization. Organize a committee or task force to learn about the school's curriculum, classroom instruction, and school policies and practices on discipline, attendance, and tracking.

5. Go to see school officials with a positive attitude and desire to learn what is going on. The school staff will be more open, and you will learn more if you belong to an organization connected with or supportive of the school.

6. Work with other parents to identify what you wish to study and evaluate at the school. Determine the type of information you need and establish

standards to measure your school's effectiveness.

7. Prepare a list of questions to provide you with data; decide on ways to gather information and collect data.

Methods for Gathering Information

* Review school materials, data and reports from the local school board, state department of education, the teachers' union, accreditation agencies, and other education offices and organizations. Remember that almost all of the reports and information prepared within a school system must be made available to the public under the freedom of information or open records laws which are in effect in every state.

* Ask the community, particularly parents and students, what they think about the school (by mail, telephone or in door-to-door interviews).

* Conduct face-to-face interviews or discussions with school board members, school administrators, teachers, students, parents.

* Observe at school, and make evaluation visits.

Parents' Groups Can Improve Schools

Parents can exert more influence and power over decisions and choices by working in groups. If there is an active PTA or PTO in your middle school, join and become active. If the PTA appears to be interested primarily in fund-raising, you might want to form an independent parent group to become involved in the school's organization, curriculum, policies, and practices.

The issues covered in the preceding section on school evaluation may be used as a framework to assist a parent group in choosing the types of problems and concerns they consider most in need of attention and solution. Work to frame your goals and expectations as positive constructive suggestions, rather than just complaints.

Parents can become a vital and powerful force for supporting and improving schools. As the persons most concerned with your children's futures, you have a right, and a responsibility,

to participate in the decisions concerning policies, practices, and curriculum which will affect your middle schoolers.

Here are some issues taken on by parent groups at the middle school level.

* A parent group in Missouri forms in opposition to the practice of tracking in the school. They gather information on the research concerning ability grouping and the alternatives available, present it to the school board, and urge them to take action to replace homogeneous grouping with the "Joplin plan" in an effort to improve the quality of education for *all* children in the middle school.

* In Pennsylvania, parents object to the rigid regulations in their middle school: students are not allowed to talk in the halls or at lunch; bathroom doors are kept locked most of the day; parents are not allowed to visit the classrooms. The parents complain to the superintendent and the school board, and hold a protest rally outside the school to dramatize their concerns.

* A Baltimore, Maryland, parents' group is opposed to the disciplinary policies in their children's middle school. Dozens of students each day are excluded from school under the school's "DR" policies. These Disciplinary Removals are imposed on students who are a few minutes late to school, who do not complete homework assignments, or who are frequently absent from school. The parents are trying to convince school

officials their children have a right to an education and should be encouraged to be in school every day.

These three efforts are examples of parent groups objecting to school discipline and tracking policies. Other parent groups might collaborate with school administrators and teachers to assess their school in order to take steps to improve the curriculum. Some groups may serve as parent support and education groups, assisting their members to better understand their children in the middle school years.

The groups in our examples began their efforts by talking with teachers and administrators at the middle school. In the case of the Missouri group, the parents soon learned that tracking was a policy determined by the school board under the influence of the superintendent. Their main focus became trying to convince the school board to change the tracking policy.

Speaking to school board members, individually or at school board meetings can be an effective strategy for the Pennsylvania and Maryland parents who are trying to influence school climate and school discipline policies. School board members may listen to complaints about local school practices and call upon the superintendent to investigate practices which may be inconsistent with school board intent.

The media can be used effectively as part of your group's strategy. Press conferences and written press releases can be used to present your story to the public or publicize an important report. In addition, letters to the editor provide a way to express your point of view or correct inaccurate statements made about your group or the issues you are working on. Radio and television talk shows or community service programs are a good way to reach large numbers of the public.

Further Reading on School Evaluation

***Finding Out How People Feel About Local Schools*, 1984, 66 pages softcover, National Committee for Citizens in Education, $3.50, plus $2.00 handling on order.**

Taking a survey or opinion poll can be an important first step to any school improvement plan. This handbook includes step-by-step instructions on how to conduct a poll and to use the results effectively.

***Making the Middle Grades Work*, A Publication of the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Clearinghouse, 1988, 30 pages, Children's Defense Fund.**

Examines the role that the middle grades play in helping young people through the years of early adolescence. Provides data on student achievement and social problems facing this age group, and outlines a blueprint for effective middle schools. Also reports on a state survey undertaken by CDF on state policies which affect middle schools.

***Middle Grades Assessment Program* (MGAP), by Gayle Dorman, 1985, Center for Early Adolescence.**

A comprehensive tool for assessing a school's responsiveness to the academic and developmental needs of young adolescent students. Reviews current research, and provides structured observation and interview instruments for those evaluating the effectiveness of the middle school.

MGAP materials include a Leader's Manual ($25.00), a User's Manual ($12.50), and a slide-tape program ($50.00) that reviews early adolescent development and school responsiveness and shows assessment team members how they can sharpen their observation and interviewing skills.

"Middle Schools: A Focus on Helping Students at Risk" *STEPS*, December, 1986, National Coalition of Advocates for Students.

Identifies some school policies and practices that put students at risk in the middle grades, and outlines reforms needed in middle schools as an approach to dropout prevention.

***Neighborhood Organizing for Urban School Reform*, by Michael R. Williams, 1989, 181 pages, $14.95 softcover, plus $1.75 shipping; $27.95 hardcover, plus $1.75 shipping. The Teachers College Press, P.O. Box 939, Wolfboro, NH 03894-0939 (800) 356-0409.**

"This book ... tries to lay bare the complexities that cause urban schools to fail, as a precondition for organizing. It assumes that the potential for change exists in most low-to-moderate-income neighborhoods in the form of residents, unbeaten by poverty."

***Parents Organizing to Improve Schools*. English version, 52 pages softcover (1984) $3.50, Spanish version, 61 pages softcover (1981) $1.75, National Committee for Citizens in Education. Add $2.00 handling to order.**

Step-by-step guide to organizing and running parent groups in schools that can act effectively to upgrade the quality of education and get parents into the educational scene in a lasting way.

"The School-Community Planning Process: A Meaningful Partnership in Educational Decision Making," by William Kerewsky, *The Clearing House*, Vol. 59, 1985.

The steps involved in changing school structure from that of a typical junior high school to a middle school are described in detail.

"School Environments for Young Adolescents: What Parents Should Look For," 1982, 2-fold flyer, Part of a 3-pamphlet set with "School Environments for Young Adolescents" and "Talking with YoungAdolescents about School," $2.00 plus 10% shipping, Center for Early Adolescence.

***Survey of State Policies and Programs for the Middle Grades*, Prepared by Diane August, 1988, 237 pages, Children's Defense Fund. $7.95.**

Includes summary charts on survey findings, and fact sheets for each state, covering such topics as staff certification, program improvement, data collection requirements, and promotion and remediation requirements at the middle grades level.

***Your School: How Well Is It Working?* A Citizens Guide to School Evaluation, 1982, 76 pages. softcover, National Committee for Citizens in Education, $3.50, plus $2.00 handling on order.**

How to measure the effectiveness of your school by carefully and systematically collecting information, analyzing facts, and drawing conclusions. Handbook helps citizens use evaluation methods to measure the quality of local schools.

For the addresses of organizations which have published some of these materials, turn to page 87.

Parent Involvement in Education
It's more important than ever in middle school

Not too long ago, many parents and educators agreed that once children entered school, their education was best left to the professionals. After all, they were the ones trained to do the job. Besides, modern teaching methods are so complex that parents would just get in the way. And what about parents who can barely read and write or understand English, what can they possibly contribute?

Now we know otherwise. Although our common sense may have whispered it all along, the research is overwhelmingly clear:

When parents are involved, children do better in school and they go to better schools.

This is true whether parents are college-educated or grade school graduates. What counts is that you have a positive attitude about how important a good education is, and express confidence that your children will succeed. (The effect is even more powerful among low income and minority families.) Some of the major benefits researchers have found:

- ☐ Higher grades and test scores, throughout a student's career
- ☐ Positive attitudes and behavior, for both students and teachers
- ☐ More successful academic programs
- ☐ More effective schools.

The earlier parents are involved, and in as many ways as possible, the longer and stronger the impact on their children's success in school, and throughout life.

If you were involved in your child's education at home and at school during the elementary years, you may feel things changing. It's harder to think of educational activities for

The Comer Process

A leading supporter of parent involvement to improve schools is Yale psychiatrist James Comer. Beginning in 1969 he worked what some would say is a miracle in two inner city elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut. His master plan for the schools included a school management team directed by the school principal and including parents, teachers and support staff. Parents were paid as classroom aides and helped put on workshops for other parents on how the school was organized and how to help their children perform.

Over the course of the project, the first school's test scores climbed from 32nd out of 33 schools in the system to third in academic achievement in the city. Students and teachers had the best attendance records in the city, and the school reported no severe discipline problems, a complete turnaround from its previous record. The second school, which joined the project in 1977, showed similar improvement.

Now school districts all over the country are experimenting with the model and Comer is applying his principles to middle schools in New Haven and Prince George's County, Maryland.

middle schoolers; the school doesn't invite you to come as often; and, when you do go to school, your child pretends she doesn't know you. Stick with it. While the nature of your involvement may change during the middle school years, it's more important than ever.

Being together--
and other home activities that pay off in higher student achievement

We are well on our way to knowing the qualities that make schools effective: where *all* students, even those who don't speak English or whose families are barely able to pay the rent, are mastering all the important skills expected of kids their age. As we might expect, one of these qualities is a close relationship with parents. Now we are also getting a good picture of families whose children do well in school regardless of where they live or how well educated their parents are.

What is really interesting -- if not totally surprising -- is that the qualities of effective schools and successful families are similar:

✔ strong leadership,
✔ high expectations of children,
✔ a clear sense of purpose,
✔ an orderly climate, and
✔frequent checking on student progress.

Understanding the similarities between effective schools and families can help parents and educators know what is

most important to do and reinforce each other's efforts.

For most parents, though, a big question remains. How do we make best use of our limited time? Do we have to tutor our kids in algebra or design prize-winning science projects? Not at all.

The simplest answer is this: create a home that is orderly, purposeful, and positive. This means paying a lot of attention to the small things, like sharing meals, having a daily routine, staying in touch with each other, planning a block party or family reunion, making up menus for the week, or even watching television together.

A group of California researchers found that everyday things like sitting together for breakfast or dinner, shopping for groceries, working on hobbies, and spending weekend time together, made a big difference on how well kids do in school. Believe it or not, sharing in these daily routines were more connected to success in school than cultural activities like visiting museums or going to concerts, or even than parent "controls" like setting rules about bedtime or watching TV.

Is Your Family an Effective Learning Team?

We have been hearing a lot lately about how little time family members spend talking to each other. One study found that most parents talk to their kids less than five minutes a day. Building time into the daily routine to talk -- and *listen* to what your child has to say-- has a big payoff in terms of good grades and good behavior among middle school students.(For more on how to talk to your middle schooler turn to page 49)

One of the best studies we've read is by Reginald Clark, a researcher who spent several weeks with families in Chicago public housing projects. All had students in high school, but half were at the top of their class; the other half were at the bottom.

Over and over in the homes of high achievers, Clark found similar patterns.

1. Parents and kids talked to each other all the time.

10 Characteristics of Effective Families

The following characteristics were identified by researcher Reginald Clark among a group of low income Black families who produced high achieving high school students:

1. A feeling of having control over their lives

2. Frequent communication of high expectations to children

3. A family dream of success for the future

4. Hard work seen as a key to success

5. A physically active lifestyle

6. 25-35 hours of family "learning" time per week

7. The family viewing itself as a mutual support system and problem-solving unit

8. Clearly understood household rules, consistently enforced

9. Frequent contact with teachers

10. Emphasis on spiritual growth

2. Limits were placed on behavior for all members (not just the kids) and were clear and consistent,

3. Families had a regular routine, especially at bed and meal times.

4. They valued learning and strongly encouraged homework and reading.

5. At the beginning of school, parents visited with teachers and made it clear they expected their children to do well. Then they kept it up throughout the year.

Parents of children who do well in school help their children gain knowledge and sound literacy skills. Their homes are often gathering places for the neighborhood, and friends stop by to share experiences, have a bite, and dispense news and wisdom. In families where parents barely know how to read, children read newspapers and books aloud and help handle the money.

In these well-run homes, family members treat each other in warm, friendly ways. Nicknames are positive and affectionate. Discipline is loving. Helping each other is part of the day. Everyone regularly pitches in with the chores. If a student is studying, the TV is turned off. At bedtime, visitors go home. The family creed is "our kids will be more successful than we have been."

What is important to success is how the family members treat each other, not income, education, or material possessions.

What's Your "Parenting" Style?--
It can make a difference in school achievement.

A California researcher asked high school students in the San Francisco area about how their family background related to good grades. From what they said, he found three basic parenting styles:

1. **Tell 'em and that's it--(Authoritarian):** Parents tell children not to disagree with or question adults. They punish children for poor grades, and respond to good grades with instructions to do even better.

2. **Kids growing up on their own--(Permissive):** Parents do not seem to care whether grades are poor or good, do not stress working hard, establish no rules about watching TV, and are not involved in education, either at home or school.

3. **In charge but willing to listen--(Authoritative):** Parents tell children to look at both sides of an issue, admit that kids sometimes know more, talk about family matters and encourage everyone to participate in decisions, and respond to good grades with praise. Low grades are greeted with some restrictions, but also with offers of help and encouragement.

Which one do you think produces students who do well in school?

Despite the image we all grew up with, of the ideal parent as a strong, commanding figure who will not yield to children, the researcher found that the first kind of parents have kids who are not doing well in school. This is true no matter what the ethnic background or education level, and in both single and two-parent families. *Permissive* parenting (which we also heard a lot about) is connected to low grades as well.

The third parenting style (authoritative), on the other hand, is definitely connected with strong student achievement. The idea, of course, is that encouraging children to question things and to accept responsibility (rather than dominating or ignoring them), helps them to develop and mature. Clark

also found that his less successful families were authoritarian or permissive, or, worse yet, an inconsistent mix of both.

Latchkey Dilemma

With middle schoolers we have to strike a delicate balance between nurture and self-sufficiency. They want to be pampered and cared for, but at the same time they want to be independent and to do things for themselves. The latchkey dilemma is a good example. The dignity of a twelve-year-old is injured by a "baby sitter," but she feels resentful and neglected if left to fend for herself.

What to do? If you are lucky enough to have some good after-school programs in your town for students this age the problem may be solved. School based programs are the most convenient for working parents because no transportation is needed, but churches, YMCA's, Girls and Boys Clubs and community recreation departments are other places to check. If your child is home alone, call him every day after school to check in, hear the news, and give some instructions about dinner. Studies show these latch-key children are more secure and do better in school than those who don't hear from their parents.

Family Chores and Decisions

How to Involve your Middle Schooler

Give your preteens jobs around the house. It helps them feel as though they are important members of the family and

channels some of their excess energy constructively. It teaches self discipline and responsibility, too. When you assign household tasks, include your middle schooler in deciding what they should be, and help him out from time to time. Kids this age love to eat, so ask them to plan the menus for a week and then draw up the grocery list. Or ask them to fix dinner on Thursday nights. Be available to answer questions or help with cooking.

Washington Post columnist Marguerite Kelly recommends that a thirteen-year-old contribute about 12 hours a week to the family chores. Here is her list:

- Make his bed every day before breakfast
- Straighten the bathroom (or the living room, or the kitchen) each day
- Fix two weekday suppers (or breakfasts) (or pack the lunches all week)
- Set (or clear) the table each night
- Wash or dry the dishes (or put away the clean ones)
- Put her bedroom in order before going to sleep
- Change his sheets once a week
- Do her own laundry
- Donate two hours a weekend to general cleaning -- running the carpet sweeper or vacuum cleaner, washing windows, cleaning out the refrigerator, washing the car.

The trick is to do these things together. Kids this age resent being "stuck" with chores but enjoy pitching in. They also like company (even if they seem to be spending a lot of time alone in their room).

Research on "higher order thinking skills" (such as planning, comparing, analyzing) shows that children benefit tremendously from being included in adult conversation. If you are planning the family budget, let your middle schooler participate. When thinking about making a major purchase, (a car or TV) discuss it with your young teen. Take her along to the library with you to compare the various makes and models rated in *Consumer Reports*, or bring your child along when you shop. Just reviewing the routine for the day over breakfast helps develop planning skills teenagers need.

Helping with Homework

By middle school, your child may be learning things you either never covered in school or have forgotten. That's okay. You aren't supposed to do the work for your student anyway. You can help even if you don't know the subject or speak the language. Here are some key questions to ask when your child is having trouble with homework.

--Do you understand what you are supposed to do? Say it in your own words, step by step.
--Have you read the background material?
--Have you read the directions? If not, read over them aloud.
--Do you *have* the directions, or did you leave them at school?
--Do you have everything you need to complete the work (ruler, atlas, compass, textbook, colored pencils, etc.)?
--Have you allowed enough time to complete the assignment ?

These five steps help middle schoolers get organized. This solves about 80% of their homework problems at this age.

If a child is still stumped ask...
--How far did you get in the assignment? Let's pinpoint the problem.
--Did you miss a class where instructions were given?
--Are there terms or words you do not understand? If so look them up in a dictionary.
--Do you need to review first?
--Is your answer unreasonable? How can you check your work?

If your child is having frequent problems in completing homework, contact the teacher. Don't wait. The teacher needs to be alerted in order to help your child.

Homework--
Taming the Beast in the Attic

For some reason our picture of ideal family life seems to include parents helping their kids with homework. But it is a rare parent who can step into the middle of a difficult long division problem and explain how to do it. It is one thing to quiz your kids on spelling words or state capitals, and quite another to become an associate teacher. We don't necessarily recommend it.

In fact, many parents, social workers, and psychologists say that conflict over homework is one of the most frequent causes of family argument. For a family coping with this ugly monster, Dr. William Stixrud has some excellent advice:

1. If your child consistently refuses to do homework, regardless of your threats and punishments, remember that the harder you pull, the more he will dig in. Lay off for a few days and let the air clear.

2. Explain, in a calm and affectionate way, that you don't intend to fight over homework any longer. Say something like this: "I made a mistake in thinking it is MY job to see that the work gets done, because it is really YOUR job to do it. I am not going to hassle you any more."

3. Then, explain that you are available when he needs help, so long as he requests the help and accepts it when offered. Set time limits, like between 7 and 8 p.m. weekday evenings, and stick to it. If there is a bedtime panic, don't

give in. Suggest that he finish in the morning, but remind him that you are only available in the evening.

4. Provide a quiet, orderly place for working. This means keeping distractions down. It is hardly fair to expect your middle school student to focus on schoolwork when the rest of the family is watching *The Cosby Show*.

5. Confer about a system of rewards for finishing homework consistently, like a shopping trip or a picnic lunch just with you. The idea is not to offer material rewards so much as special attention. Your job is to help your child develop ways to become self-motivated.

If your child has been diagnosed as having learning disabilities do not attempt to be a nightly tutor. Help only when instructed by a professional. Students who suffer from dyslexia (difficulty in reading), dysgraphia (difficulty with handwriting) or other specific learning problems, need special teaching techniques and can become very upset while attempting to complete schoolwork. What they need at the end of their school day is a rest from frustration, not more of the same.

Discipline

The ways in which you exercised your authority with a young child are different from those that are appropriate for young adolescents. Adolescents cannot be forced physically to obey you. So if you have kept your children in line by hitting them, you will need to replace that form of discipline. As children mature and grow to be as tall (or taller) than you are, they will no longer submit to spanking or the strap. Instead, adolescents will fight back or leave home.

Adolescents need limits and rules, but they want a hand in setting them, and they will be quick to argue if they think your rules are unfair.

As you try to reach agreement with your child, remember, you are still the parent; you can refuse to make deals when your child's safety or welfare is at stake. Adolescents will

Guidelines for Setting Rules and Limits at Home

1. Involve adolescents in making decisions about rules and limits by negotiating or making contracts with them. Have rules and limits that you, your adolescent, and the rest of your family can live with.

2. Have as few absolute rules as possible.

3. Have logical, sound reasons for all rules and limits, and be willing to explain these reasons to your adolescent in a nondefensive manner. Expect to be challenged and questioned.

4. Rules, limits, and consequences should hold adolescents responsible for their own behavior.

5. When rules and limits are broken, do not tell the child he or she is a failure. Use the occasion as an opportunity for learning. Share your own failures. But do not excuse or ignore unacceptable behavior.

6. All rules and limits should be realistic and attainable. Consider the needs, abilities, and concerns of both your adolescent and yourself when establishing rules. Also consider your unique family situation.

7. Rules and limits should be open for discussion and change as your adolescent accepts more responsibility and requests more independence, or as your family situation changes.

(based on *Early Adolescence: What Parents Need to Know* developed by the Center for Early Adolescence)

challenge rules, but they respect firmness if you explain why you cannot bend them.

Limits that *are* open for discussion relate to setting reasonable expectations of your middle schooler: doing chores, meeting curfews, completing homework. Be frank about your limits and expectations. Sharing ideas and being willing to listen will win your youngster's respect.

Adolescence is a unique but normal phase in a family's life with many predictable events. Changes are coming and you can not expect to adjust to them overnight. But the more you know about the changes and how to respond to them appropriately, the better you will get along.

Communication

One important way to avoid family argument is to talk with your middle schooler every day. Like discipline, conversation will be more difficult if you have not been able to communicate with your youngster before. Even if you have, it may become more difficult during adolescence. Your child may feel like talking some days and not others.

Communicating with middle school students involves more than just talking and responding to what is said. It requires patience to understand the feelings behind what they say and do. Listen to your child carefully and with an open mind -- without judging or criticizing -- and you will learn a lot about his or her behavior. Through daily communication, you help your teenager

learn to make decisions and to weigh the consequences of actions. Even disagreeing with you is a sign of healthy growth.

Be a good listener. Effective listening involves hearing what is said, observing what is done, and trying to understand another's point of view. Learn to "listen" to a message that is unspoken, for example when a teenager withdraws to the bedroom for long periods of time. Remember that teenagers have the right *not* to talk about their feelings. Learning to manage one's own feelings and problems is a part of growing up. When teenagers feel you are trying to understand their point of view, they are much more likely to express their concerns. When you accept your children's ideas without judging or lecturing, you also help build their self-esteem and confidence.

Talking with Young Adolescents about School

Discussing school with a middle school student is quite different from talking to an elementary school child. If you are willing to acknowledge changes and listen to their concerns, discussing school can not only inform you about your children's education, but also can strengthen your relationship. Here's an extra bonus: daily conversation between parent and child about school is one of the activities researchers find has the strongest association with good grades. When parents can get past the "yes" and "no" answers, the questions about homework, and the one-way lectures about the importance of school, they can begin to hear what a teenager really thinks and feels about school.

Have you had trouble getting to first base in a conversation with your teenager? Here are some questions to try for openers:

* What are you really good at in school?
* Is the work too hard, too easy, or just right for you?
* If English is a second language,
  --Do you understand everything the teacher is saying?
  --Can you express your own ideas?
  --Do you need extra help in learning English?

Tips for Talking to Young Adolescents about School

1. Talk together every day.

2. Learn the meaning of some teenage slang.

3. Be a good listener.

4. Don't start with a challenge or criticism.

5. Ask some questions that cannot be answered simply by "yes" or "no."

6. Don't lecture or argue.

7. Ask yourself, "What is my child feeling that he or she is *not* saying?"

8. Offer praise and extend help.

9. Be honest--support what you feel is good about the school, but also share your concern if you feel that the school's position and practices are harmful to your child.

(source: "Talking with Young Adolescents About School" published by the Center for Early Adolescence).

- Are teachers interested in what you think? How do they show (or not show) their interest?

- How much do you think adults at the school care for you?

- Do you have a close relationship with at least one adult staff member at school?

- Do you worry a lot about having things stolen from you or being harmed by someone while you are at school?

- Do you feel you can express your ideas and concerns without being made fun of by someone else at school? Why or why not?

- How do you feel about your school?

- What is the best thing about your school?

- What changes would you like to see at your school?

Curriculum Choices

Most middle schools require all students to take the same subjects. Still, there are choices you should know about, and steer your child towards, especially if he or she is not happy in middle school. Everyone takes math every year, for instance, but at varying levels. You don't want your child to be in over her head, but you *do* want her to advance as soon as she is ready so that she can take algebra and geometry later. Talk with your child and her teacher to see whether she is in the best place to make steady progress.

Secondly, middle schools may offer some choices in the form of mini-courses or after-school clubs and team sports. If your child seems bored or has very narrow interests, encourage him to sample a variety of subjects. Suggest he sign up for soccer after school in the fall, then take the 8-week computer course during the winter offered in a special period after lunch. Different schools have different offerings, so ask at school if you are not sure what is available.

At this age students are forever changing their minds about what they want to do, and that's healthy. They should be sampling a great many subjects that may develop into lasting interests. The important thing is to experience them in an atmosphere of high expectations. We have pointed out in our "Straight Talk" section (page 14) how important high school and higher education will be for these students. You should be sure your child is placed in courses which will lead to the college preparatory curriculum in high school.

Middle school is also an appropriate time to begin looking at vocational or technical training for careers. Talk with the guidance counselor and suggest that the school offer some opportunities for students to learn about promising careers, and what educational preparation students need for them. Review your child's course of study each year in the middle school. Note whether he or she is studying subjects which will prepare the student for high school, college, or a satisfying career.

Don't be a Stranger to your Child's Middle School--
The welcome mat should be out.

Your neighbor tells you American Education Week is coming up. (Somehow your 12-year-old neglected to bring home the notice.) You decide to visit school. A helpful volunteer in the school lobby (a parent like yourself) explains your son's schedule and directs you to his next class. There, several of his classmates wave at you but your offspring pretends he's never laid eyes on you before. After class he tells you he wished the floor had opened up under his desk and swallowed him whole.

Parent/Teacher Conferences in Middle School

Make appointments to meet with your child's teachers at the end of the first marking period to check on your child's adjustment to middle school and whenever your child or school personnel mention some problem. Unlike elementary school, middle schools usually do not set aside several days a year for parent/teacher conferences, so you will need to ask for an appointment. Here are some tips to make your meeting go more smoothly:

1. Decide whether your child should attend the meeting. If not, at least talk to your child about the meeting beforehand and afterward.

2. Arrive on time, prepared to ask questions.

3. Compliment the teacher on things that are going well before you mention complaints or problems.

4. Time may be limited so zero in on your biggest concerns.

5. Take notes on important points.

6. If your child is having difficulty in more than one subject, try to convene a meeting with teachers of all the classes affected.

7. View your meeting as a problem solving session, not a time to blame each other for past failure.

8. Close the meeting with a clear understanding about what happens next.

How is this young person really feeling about your visit to school? Don't be put off by your middle schooler's protests. Outwardly he is embarrassed, but secretly he is proud that you gave up part of your busy day to come to school.

Should you come again? By all means. The more you come, the more involved you are in all kinds of activities at the school, the less embarrassed your middle schooler will be and the more pride he will take in your involvement. That pride and extra measure of self esteem will carry him through many difficult situations during his middle and high school career. When the course seems too hard or friends desert him, the fact that you think your child can succeed (and you demonstrate that by coming to school) will help your child stick with it.

When you become involved at school, the message to your child is clear: my parent cares about me and what happens in school.

Adjusting to the Middle School Routine

It may be difficult for you to make that first contact with middle school. For both parents and students, adjusting to the difference between a smaller, more family-style elementary school and a larger middle school or junior high, can be a tough job. The building is larger, and almost always farther from home. Your child will have several teachers rather than one, and each teacher will be assigned many more students. The daily schedule is more complicated, and

it will change constantly. The principal may seem powerful and remote.

Be prepared. Know in advance what kinds of adjustments you will have to make:

1. Get to know several teachers rather than just one. Let them all know that you expect your child to do well in school. Introduce yourself to the principal, too. Don't wait for a problem to arise. Make that first meeting a friendly, positive one.

2. Stay in touch with the counselors. In many schools, it's their job to keep track of the kids and get in touch with parents if any problems develop. And check to make sure your child stays in touch with them, too.

3. Stay in touch with the parent contact person at the school. If there isn't one, suggest that someone fill that role.

4. Collect information on school policies and curriculum. The school may have a handbook that contains all this. Also ask about access to your child's school records, and ask to see them every year. It's your right, and you may be surprised at what's there.

5. Monitor your child's test scores and performance carefully, especially in any subjects where he or she has had trouble or is below grade level. The pace is faster in middle school, so students are at more risk of falling behind.

6. Ask for periodic parent/teacher conferences, either during the day or in the evening. They may not be scheduled automatically around report card time as they were during elementary school. If you don't speak or understand English, request a translator for the conference. Be sure to keep any appointment you make with teachers or others at school.

7. Communicate with your child about each problem that comes up, then contact the appropriate school staff person to help you resolve it.

8. Check any special education placement. If you have a question about whether it is the best decision for your child, get some expert help. Ask if there is an advocacy program for parents of special education students.

9. Be visible at school. Your children will feel more important if you are around, even if they would never admit it. (If you cannot be at the school often, at the very least (1) inform teachers and principal of your work schedule and how to reach you by phone and (2) phone or write notes to the teacher occasionally.)

10. Ask tough questions, like average seventh grade math performance and whether students are tracked by ability. Try not to get stuck in "fluff" activities.

11. Get to know other parents at school. Compare notes on teachers, the principal, the tone of the school, what the kids do together after school and on weekends.

12. React and respond to notes and other communications from school. The middle school locker is a bottomless pit, so be sure to ask your child every couple of days if there are any messages from school.

How Middle Schools Encourage Parent Involvement

We often hear that once kids get to be preteens, parents should back off and let them be independent. Certainly, young adolescents need to take on more responsibility for managing their lives as they get older, but they are not ready to be on their own. Schools often send a not-too-subtle message that parents who come to school, or ask frequently to see teachers, or spend a lot of time with their kids, are meddlesome and overbearing, or can't let go.

Kids at this age need their parents more than ever. They need close, caring adults with whom to share their increasingly complex and grown-up thoughts. They need reassurance that they are loved and cared for. They need help understanding the rules of the bigger leagues. They need to know that some very important basic things don't change even when everything else is changing.

Schools that understand young adolescents work actively to keep their parents informed and involved. They are organized so that someone knows each student well, and that person is responsible for staying in touch with the parents. They provide lots of occasions for parents to come to school, see things for themselves, meet the staff, and get to know the other kids and their parents. And they make parents feel welcome at all times.

If your school is doing a good job working in partnership with parents, it should be doing these kinds of things:

A clear, welcoming parent involvement policy is published for all to see and posted in an obvious place. It should tell when the school is open to parents, and whether the classrooms can be visited at any time; when teachers are available for parent conferences and what hours the principal keeps for parents; when parents may use the school facilities for meetings and social events.

The school is organized so that at least one person knows each child well -- how she is doing in all her subjects, whether she is making friends and adjusting well to the

environment, if she seems withdrawn or disengaged, why she doesn't like gym this year. And that person stays in touch with parents, not just to tell them about trouble but to share the successes as well.

The school office is friendly and open. No one asks, "What do YOU want?" Parents are treated with respect and not kept waiting.

The school sponsors parent-to-parent communication and events, so families can get to know each other and develop common standards for their children's behavior and social life. There should be a few purely fun social events, like a 50's sock hop, a bowling party, a pot-luck dinner, or a card party.

A full-time parent contact person is responsible for bringing parents and school together. This person helps parents to understand the school structure and who is who, attends meetings in the community, telephones parents when their child misses school, talks to teachers about parent concerns and needs, greets parents when they come to school, arranges tours of the building for new families, makes home visits. This person does not have to be a professional, but he or she is an expert on the community and how it feels about the school.

There is a parent room in the school building, equipped with comfortable places to sit, a telephone, books about middle school age children and what they need, and access to a copying machine. Some schools even provide a

kitchen or laundry room, sewing machines, or a computer or typewriter.

Parents and school staff work together to determine parents' needs and provide necessary services. Sometimes, parents will need things that don't seem directly related to how their children are doing in school, like help understanding the immigration laws, or how to get their power turned back on, or medical care for a sick grandparent. The school can and should be a center for community services that will help its families.

Parents whose primary language is not English are welcome at the school and a translator is provided to help them communicate.

Further Reading on Parent Involvement

***Beyond the Bake Sale: An Educator's Guide to Working with Parents*, by Anne Henderson, Carl Marburger, and Theodora Ooms, 1985 160 pages. National Committee for Citizens in Education. $8.95 softcover, plus $2.00 for postage and handling.**

Shows principals and teachers how to build parent-school partnerships that go beyond fund-raising. Emphasis is on collaboration, needed to raise student achievement and improve operation of schools. Includes special advice on how to involve single, low-income, and working parents.

***Critical Factors in Why Disadvantaged Students Succeed or Fail in School*, by Reginald M. Clark, 1988, 19 pages, Academy for Educational Development, 1255 23rd St., N.W., Washington, DC 20037, (202)862-1947.**

The author examines the critical factors in why disadvantaged children succeed or fail in school. He explains the home, family, and community norms, values, and behaviors that mediate the environmental effects of being disadvantaged. He offers a set of practical strategies for planning effective home-school partnerships and information programs for parents.

***Early Adolescence: What Parents Need to Know*, by Anita M. Farel, 1982, 37 pages. Center for Early Adolescence, $4.00 plus 10% shipping.**

An easy-to-read handbook for parents seeking to understand the rapid physical, emotional, intellectual, and social changes their 10- to 15-year old children are experiencing. Emphasizes how parents can respond effectively to these changes.

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Further Reading on Parent Involvement

The Evidence Continues to Grow: Parent Involvement Improves Student Achievement. **An annotated bibliography, by Anne Henderson, 1987, 96 pages. softcover. National Committee for Citizens in Education. $10.00 plus $2.00 for postage and handling.**

Summaries of 49 studies on parent involvement and student achievement. Research points to the benefits of including parents in school-designed programs, encouraging parents to monitor children's schoolwork at home, and calling parents in to help when children are failing. Each study is summarized with analysis of major conclusions.

Family Life and School Achievement: Why Poor Black Children Succeed or Fail, **by Reginald M. Clark, 1983, 249 pages, University of Chicago Press.**

A study of ten poor, Black families and their high school-aged children finds that a family's overall cultural style, not marital status, educational level, income, or social surroundings, is what determines whether children perform well in school.

Helping Students Develop Self-Motivation: A Sourcebook for Parents and Educators, **by Donald R. Grossnickle, 1989, 22 pages, National Association of Secondary School Principals.**

Analyzes the factors involved in motivation, discusses self-motivation and self-control as characteristics of achievers, lists the steps needed to develop these traits, and provides many suggestions for parents and teachers to use to help motivate students.

Helping Your Child Succeed in School, **1989, 36 pages. The Association of American Publishers School Division. For copies, contact Sandra Conn Associates, 2551 N. Clark St., Suite 400, Chicago, IL 60614, (312)327-0082.**

An attractive, well-written handbook for parents, which provides basic, practical suggestions on how to prepare children for success in school, how to help them with learning and study skills, guidelines for studying various school subjects, and suggestions on how to turn around problem situations.

"Homework," ***The Harvard Education Letter,*** **Volume 1, Number 1, February, 1985.**

Discusses what homework can and does accomplish, what the elements of a successful homework policy are, and how teachers can accommodate a wide range of student interest and ability in their homework policies.

"Homework Is In -- And Parents Can Make a Difference," ***NETWORK,*** **April 1986, National Committee for Citizens in Education.**

Newsletter issue includes several articles to help parents deal with problems which may arise over homework including: "Stop Fighting with Your Child over Homework -- Now!" by William R. Stixrud and "Helping with Homework -- What's a Parent to Do?

"Parent Participation in the Schools," by James P. Comer, ***Phi Delta Kappan,*** **October 1986.**

Given the complexity of the modern world, today's students need more adult help than children did in the past, says Dr. Comer. Programs that involve parents effectively in the schools can provide a desirable context for teaching and learning.

"The Relation of Parenting Style to Adolescent School Performance," by Sanford Dornbusch, and others, October 1987, ***Child Development.***

A study of San Francisco area high school students found that parenting style, or variations in family processes, is a more powerful predictor of student achievement than parent education, ethnicity, or family structure.

School Power, **by James P. Comer, 1980, 285 pages, New York, MacMillan, The Free Press.**

A long-term program to change the governance and organization of two inner-city New Haven schools, partly by including substantial parent involvement, resulted in significant, lasting gains in student achievement.

"Surviving the Middle School Years" and "10 Ways to Help a Middle School Student," by Mickey Offutt, ***NETWORK,*** **December/January 1985, National Committee for Citizens in Education.**

The author, a reading specialist in an Illinois middle school and mother of a teenager, offers tips to parents to help you live through this difficult period in your child's development.

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Further Reading on Parent Involvement

***Involving Parents in Middle Level Education*, by John W. Myers, 1985, 45 pages. National Middle School Association, $6.00.**

Outlines the reasons for encouraging parent involvement, identifies some of the roles parents may play and delineates steps to be taken to establish a program to use the talents of parents in the instructional program. Describes several on-going, successful parent involvement projects at the middle school level.

***Living with 10- to 15-Year-Olds: A Parent Education Curriculum*, by Gayle Dorman, Dick Geldof, and Bill Scarborough, 1982, 270 pages., looseleaf notebook, Center for Early Adolescence. $65.00.**

Focuses on four topics of particular interest to parents of young teenagers: living with 10- to 15-year-olds; talking about sex; risk-taking behavior and young adolescents; and understanding early adolescents. Can be used to conduct community conferences or informal parent discussion groups. Specially designed for use by local organizations. Includes planning suggestions, workshop designs, handout materials, and lists of suggested readings.

***National Education Initiative: What Students Need To Know*, 1988, 156 pages, National Urban League, $10.00.**

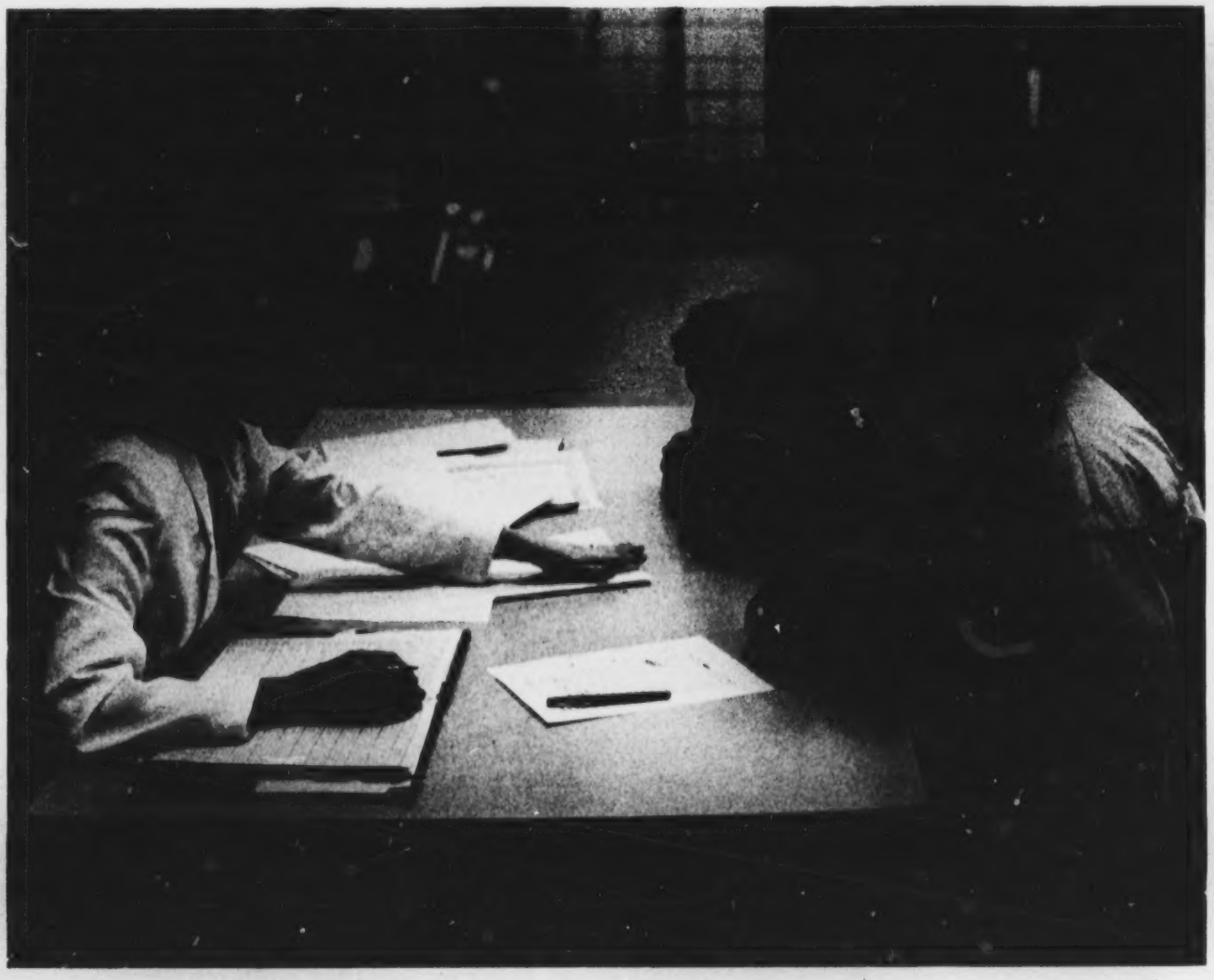
This guide for parents and parent group leaders explains to parents academic subjects and basic competencies (writing, listening, reasoning, using computers) students need to succeed in school now and later on the job. Available from the National Committee for Citizens in Education.

Parents and Counselors Together Program (P.A.C.T.) A Guide to Presenting Parent Workshops that Promote Educational Success with Students, 1989, 68 pages, looseleaf notebook, National Association of College Admission Counselors, Suite 430, 1800 Diagonal Road, Alexandria, VA 22314, (703)836-2222.

This publication includes information and suggestions for counselors and educators to establish direct contact with parents to aid them in building a foundation for educational success and guiding their children toward a full range of educational options.

"Talking with Young Adolescents about School," 1982, 2-fold flyer, Center for Early Adolescence. Part of a 3-pamphlet set. $2.00 plus 10% shipping.

For addresses of organizations which have published some of these materials, turn to page 87.



Today's Families: Why Parent Involvement May Be Difficult

"Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see," said education writer Neil Postman.

We may not be able to give our children wealth, but we can affect the future of the next generation by giving the gift of our time and interest as we create schools that truly help our children become competent, happy, successful adults. In that way we "send a message" to a time far off, a message that says we care.

Of course caring does not make the day longer or a parent's tasks fewer. It is difficult for the average parent to find the time or energy to concentrate on school involvement. Today less than 20% of families fit the white picket fence dream of father working 9 to 5 and mother as full time homemaker. In many parts of the country fathers are laid off from factory jobs while wives work to put bread on the table. In some city neighborhoods more than half the mothers raise children alone. Forced by life-long poverty or recent immigration to double up, as many as 12-15 extended family members live in a single room or apartment. Some single parents and recent immigrants work a day job and a night job. Some couples alternate shifts, seldom seeing each other, so that one of them can be home with the children.

Families in this country without proper papers try to become invisible in our ghettos and barrios. In cities and rural areas alike neighbors may hardly speak for fear of "learning too much" about suspected drug activities. Living in isolation deprives these families of important support and friendships among other parents.

Most school people know families are struggling but often find their resources inadequate to make a difference. Some schools in our coastal cities must communicate with their students and parents in as many as 30 languages. It is common for schools to have most or all of their students receiving free and reduced price lunches because of low family income. Schools often feel powerless when family drug or alcohol problems prevent students from learning and parents from parenting, and they know that some of their

A Word about Drugs

Drugs are a fact of life in most American communities. Different school systems have policies regarding drug possession, drug distribution and drug use. None of our children are immune to the world of drugs. As parents, it is important that we teach them our values and that we demonstrate to them our willingness to fight the drug abuse we see around us. In our roles as school advocates, it is important that we make our schools drug-free, and that appropriate policies and practices are developed which both prevent drugs from being a problem in schools *and* help youngsters who have been caught in the drug culture. Wise policies always provide for some kind of treatment for youngsters who have been involved with drugs, but these policies do not exclude children from school beyond the treatment period.

It is important, of course, to make certain that children obey the laws of our land. It is also important to assure the children of the kind of education which will allow them to make wise decisions regarding drug use, and which will provide them with the information they need in order to resist the pressures they will find in the larger community.

own middle school students become parents every year at an age when they should be concerned about homework and parties, not around-the-clock care of an infant.

At the very least, the realities of family life today call for some new strategies to help children learn and parents be involved in their child's education. Some schools have been very creative and flexible, often with the assistance of area employers, churches or community groups.

If you or other parents you know cannot read the school newsletter sent home in English only, if you cannot attend a 2 p.m. parent conference because you work or a 7 p.m PTA meeting because you have no child care, you must speak up. Tell school people what you need in order to participate in school activities. Encourage your school to try something different.

As one wise parent put it, "If you do what you done, you get what you got!"

Here are some suggestions for school people and parent involvement groups that help children and low income and working parents become involved at school:

Increased telephone contact with teachers: That means making telephones available to teachers during the day (perhaps even in their classrooms) and encouraging teachers to call students' homes in the evening.

Paid release time for working parents from employers. Several hours a month

or a year so parents can visit the school during the day.

Evening parent/teacher conferences. Negotiate with teachers for some shortened school days in return for evening hours.

Family nights. Cafeteria or potluck dinners for families, baby-sitting for young children, and activities or quiet study in the library for middle school students on the evenings when parents meet at school (the increased turnout is well worth the extra effort).

Support groups for parents who speak other languages or who have just arrived in this country. Information sharing with a school staff member and others who speak the same language to help newcomers adjust to our culture.

Transportation for parents to and from school. A good way to bring parents out in unsafe neighborhoods and rural areas.

Extended library hours. Keep the school library open after school so students can study or make it available during evening hours.

Evening classes for parents. Poll the community on whether parents want to learn reading, word processing, or just enjoy exercise or cooking classes. If churches or community centers are safer after dark, move the parent meetings and courses there.

Study halls. Reach out to and cooperate with churches and community centers or even local businesses to provide quiet study space or have several families in a single apartment complex rotate nightly "study hall" so each family only has to curtail noise one night a week.

Translators. Tap businesses with bilingual employees to translate parent newsletters or ask corporations to send volunteers fluent in other languages to school to assist parents and teachers with conferences.

Neighborhood visits. Send staff or school volunteers door-to-door to encourage parent involvement. (In our

experience, as many as 25% to 30% of low income families have no phone.)

Parent Coordinator. Assign someone at the school to talk to parents when they call or visit.

Parent involvement is not easy these days, but the pay off for students is well worth trying new and different efforts.

Further Reading about Today's Families

"Improving the School-Home Connection for Poor and Minority Urban Students," by Carol Ascher, December 1987, 21 pages, ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

Reviews the literature on parent involvement, discusses how involvement of low-income parents can be made easier, and demonstrates how home learning projects may enable families to give their children educational stimulation at home and reinforce their success at school.

"Involving Low-Income Parents in the Schools: A Role for Policy? "by Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin and Patrick M. Shields, *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1987.

Rules or mandates alone cannot bring about the changes that are necessary to encourage parent involvement in the schools, say the authors. We must motivate teachers and administrators to try new practices and strategies.

"Latchkey Adolescents--How Administrators Can Respond to Their Needs," by Lynette Long and Thomas Long, NASSP Bulletin, February 1989.

Offers suggestions to schools to reduce the hours teens are alone and involve them with their peers by developing activities and programs to meet their needs.

For the addresses of organizations which have published some of these materials, turn to page 87.

Policies that Reduce Middle School Effectiveness

How parents can challenge policies that hurt children and schools

Let us hope the middle school your child attends is a warm and nurturing place where every child is treated humanely and helped to learn many wonderful things. Unfortunately, we hear complaints from parents over the NCCE Help Line that some middle schools and junior highs are run like boot camps for high school. It's time to stop coddling these youngsters, some administrators feel. Suspend them for misbehavior, punish them for absence, and make them repeat a grade if they are behind in their work, is their philosophy. This is also a time when the sorting of children becomes more formalized. Some are put in a college-bound program while other students receive a less challenging curriculum.

Harmful practices like these mean that if your middle schooler has an unexplained absence, the truant officer may come calling, or your child could be suspended and sent home for up to 10 days for talking back to a teacher or placed in a "basic skills" group without chance for learning a foreign language or higher mathematics, based only on her score on a standardized test.

Often the overuse and misuse of tracking, suspension and retention are more prevalent among minority and low-income students than among the middle-class, White students. This is due to a combination of factors. Many low-income, minority students have gone to inferior elementary schools and have not received adequate preparation for middle school. Many schools do not have the resources to provide the extra help these students need to catch up. Bias and discrimination also may play a part, with teachers and administrators assuming "disadvantaged" students have a low ability level.

Unfair practices not only hurt students, they are detrimental to the school's effectiveness, according to reports from the National Coalition of Advocates for Students, the Center for Early Adolescence, and the Massachusetts Advocacy Center.

Call 1-800-NETWORK

when you have a question about your child in school. This is the NCCE toll-free Help Line serving parents and others interested in parent involvement in 49 states. (In Maryland call 301-997-9300.) Counselors answer daily, Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., ET. A Spanish language counselor is available most afternoons.

This section will summarize research showing why these practices are harmful and suggest more effective alternatives. We will also suggest what parents can do, on behalf of their own child and all students at their middle school, to question these policies, to appeal them if appropriate, and to bring about fundamental changes in the ways middle schools deal with these issues.

Ineffective Policies Parents Can Challenge

Policies Related to School Climate

- Excessive suspension
- Punitive practices related to attendance, truancy, and tardiness
- Racial and cultural discrimination

Academic Policies

- Overuse of retention in grade
- Rigid student tracking or grouping
- Misuse of standardized testing
- Misassignment of students to special education

1. Suspension and Expulsion

Suspension from school has become a widely used form of discipline, particularly at the middle school and high school levels. Though this is a punishment which should only be used for serious offenses such as drug use, possession of weapons, or violent behavior, many school administrators suspend students for skipping school, using foul language or making a mess in the lunchroom.

Overuse of school suspensions is likely to reflect a disorderly school. School staff have failed to communicate important reasons for students to cooperate, to teach self-discipline, to foster an environment of caring and respect for all persons in the school community, or to develop an atmosphere which meets the needs of students in this age range. Clues to overuse include suspension for minor offenses like talking back to teachers or having unexcused absences, suspensions that last longer than one to three days, and suspension of Black students or other minorities more frequently than other students.

Students in middle school need the structure and clear limits of an orderly school as the basis for learning. They also need meaningful participation in the school, positive relations with adults and children their own age, and opportunities to explore who they are. In middle schools, the conditions for an orderly school climate should be democratic, with greater emphasis on the school as a cooperative community that includes both adults and students in decision-making opportunities.

Yet schools may be tempted to use suspension more frequently than they should because it seems like a quick, easy solution to all kinds of problems. The child and his offending behavior are gone from the school immediately, and very little time, energy, and money have been spent.

In the long run, however, suspension may cause even worse problems for students and schools. Many educators and child psychologists believe that excluding students from school does not correct their behavior (if it did, no student would ever be suspended more than once for the same problem) and it hurts students academically because of lost class time. For some, forced absences mean the difference between passing and failing.

Repeated suspensions also send students a clear message that they are not welcome at school, because the school doesn't want to deal with them. Often they leave school before graduating because of their continuing failures. We call them dropouts, but a more accurate description is "pushouts."

When students are suspended for disobeying school rules, parents and students have legal rights to fair treatment.

What to Do If your Child is Suspended from School

* Ask your child what he or she believes caused the suspension, and whether there was a chance to tell teachers or administrators this version. Listen carefully. Don't jump to conclusions. Hear both sides of the story.

* Call the school and speak with the person responsible for the suspension. Ask what disciplinary measures were tried before the suspension. If you were not called about the

Student Rights in Suspension

The U.S. Supreme court ruling *Goss vs Lopez* (1975) affirmed rights for all public school students who face suspension from school. These include:

1. The right to be told the reason for the suspension (either orally or in writing)

2. The right to have an explanation of evidence against them and the opportunity to tell their side of the story

3. The right to receive an informal notice and hearing *before* the suspension takes place.

problem earlier, ask why. Don't assume the suspension period cannot be reduced or eliminated.

• Request a meeting, or hearing, about the situation if you think your son or daughter has been wrongly accused or if the length of suspension appears too severe for the offense.

• Request a copy of the school discipline code and the state law on suspensions. Read them carefully to determine if school officials have followed the rules.

• Your child has a right to be in school until the hearing. Remind school officials that he or she has a right to an education and should, like all American citizens, be considered innocent until proven guilty.

• If the suspension is upheld and your child is out of school, request that he or she be allowed to make up the work missed. If the principal will not allow schoolwork to be taken home during the suspension period, contact your child's teachers and ask each one to help your child make up missed work after returning to school.

• Insist that the days absent for suspension not be counted as unexcused absences, because they are a result of school policy.

• Work with other parents to encourage the school to revise its policy so that out-of-school suspension will be used only for students whose behavior endangers themselves or others. Work with the school to develop alternatives to suspension that emphasize conflict resolution, problem-solving, and

mediation. Hiring additional counselors or staffing in-school suspension programs will cost your school more than out-of-school suspension. If your school cannot afford these, consider an inservice training session for teachers on classroom management techniques that emphasize correcting unacceptable behavior and developing students' self-control and self-discipline. This will reduce the need for more serious measures.

2. Promotion/Retention Policies

Many educators consider holding kids back a year to be a responsible way to assist students having some learning problems. Schools call this "retention in grade" or "nonpromotion." By age 15, one out of four students has been held back in school at least once. Research indicates that this move seldom helps children educationally and causes them great embarrassment and anxiety. In one survey, students named repeating a grade as one of the worst things they could imagine happening to them. Only the death of a parent would be worse, they said.

While school principals have the authority to make the decision that a student will repeat a grade, parents should be consulted on any decision affecting a child's placement in school. Much of the research on retention shows that it does not result in higher academic achievement. It may work in early grades when children are not yet ready to read or do math problems, but by the time a student reaches middle school, nonpromotion is usually used to punish the child, not help her learn. In addition, retention of middle schoolers who do not speak English only increases their feeling of alienation. Repeating a grade should not be considered at any age unless the school has a plan to help the child. Repeating the same teaching techniques the child failed with before will not help him improve.

Why Retention is Harmful

* Research shows that repeating a grade does nothing to enhance students' achievement but does increase the likelihood that these students will drop out of school.

• Non-promotion without special help in effect denies a student's legal right to an education.

• Retention may be a discriminatory practice because Black, Hispanic, and other minority students are retained in grade more frequently than White students.

• Not one author of the six major research reviews conducted in the past 12 years concludes that repeating a grade improves student achievement.

• Students usually fall behind during the year they are retained and spend the rest of their academic career trying to catch up.

• Low-achieving students who are promoted learn more than those who repeat a grade.

Holding students back should be a last resort, used only when other alternatives prove not to be in a student's best interest. To prevent student failure, schools must change the classroom conditions that contribute to it.

Appealing a Decision to Have Your Child Repeat a Grade

If repeating a grade is being considered or recommended by the school, you, as the child's parent, should insist on being consulted and take an active role in the decision. Request a conference with the principal and teachers to undertake a thorough review of your child's record during the school year.

Before the conference parents should:

* Review the student's school records and note information on test scores, grades, etc.

* Look through the report cards to see whether your child's achievement was unsatisfactory. (Did you receive any progress reports indicating incomplete work?)

* Collect any papers and other classwork you may have kept which indicate your child's strengths and weaknesses.

At the conference...

* Carefully review the information available on your child's performance. Examine grades, test scores, classroom papers, homework, and discuss reasons why your child is not up to grade level. Also note trends to determine if the student has been making improvement in recent weeks or months.

* Ask the principal and/or teachers to explain in detail their reasons for recommending retention. If they use vague terms such as "attitude" or "motivation" or "behavior," suggest that the promotion decision should be based on academic performance, potential, and progress rather than on hard-to-measure factors such as attitude.

* If the principal and teachers refer to learning problems you have not heard about before, ask why you were not informed. If the report cards show passing grades, ask how the work is considered unsatisfactory. If learning problems are described, ask what the school plans to do to help your child. Retention without special help is not appropriate.

* If your child has limited English skills, ask whether that is a factor in the school's recommendation for retention and what the school will do to improve language skills?

* Examine scores on standardized tests. Performance on one test should not be used as the only factor in the promotion/retention decision; the low score could be the result of your child's inexperience in test-taking, problems with English, or the cultural bias of the test.

* If you feel repeating a grade would not be in the best interest of your child's education, express your view and suggest that

other steps be taken (summer school, tutoring, or special help) to assist your child in overcoming any weaknesses.

3. Tracking, Ability Grouping

The practice of assigning students to certain classes or classrooms according to their academic achievement or ability is widespread in American schools. This practice is called ability grouping, homogeneous grouping or tracking. As students proceed through the grades, more and more of their classes are organized this way, despite the fact that research consistently shows that this practice does not result in higher student achievement.

Students are often classified as fast, average, or slow learners and placed in classes on the basis of their scores on achievement or ability tests. Sometimes teachers' estimates of what students have already learned or their potential for learning are used to determine how students are identified and placed. It is no secret who is in the "slow" classes. They are clearly labeled, and teachers, parents and classmates judge a child's success or failure in school based on their assigned track.

Schools start "sorting" children in the elementary grades, by placing them in different reading groups or assigning them to different classrooms based on their perceived abilities or weaknesses. By the middle grades placement in equal ability tracks is common practice. As children progress through the elementary grades to the middle school, the gap between the lowest and the highest track widens.

Tracking has proven to be "one of the most divisive and damaging school practices," according to *Turning Points*, a report by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. Tracking is particularly harmful to those students placed in the lowest tracks. Minority youth and those from low-income families are more frequently placed in lower academic groups, reinforcing racial isolation and racial prejudice, and possibly increasing bad feelings toward school among lower achieving students and their families.

Jeannie Oakes, in her study of tracking, points out that students in the lower track are receiving a poorer quality education, in four aspects of schooling --academic learning, social relationships with peers, student self-concept (motivation and aspiration) and vocational education. Low-track classes are often taught by the least experienced teachers in the school. Students in low groups spend less time in learning activities and are less likely to be given instructional techniques associated with academic achievement.

In addition to the differences in quality of teaching and content of subjects taught, children in the lower tracks may experience a lowering of self-esteem and self-confidence as a result of being in the "slow," "basic," or "remedial" section. A low-track label is likely to lower the expectations for his or her learning held by friends, teachers, and school counselors. The student's motivation is affected, and he or she ends up achieving only what is expected.

Students in middle grades are very sensitive about their placement. Students placed in lower ability groups than their friends feel inferior to them and suspect that the adults who made that decision view them as "losers."

Parents should be aware of several alternatives to the practice of class assignment according to ability, achievement or potential. The Joplin plan calls for students from all grades to be grouped together for a given subject based on their current achievement level. These groupings can be frequently adjusted when a spurt of learning occurs or a student is motivated to work especially hard to move up to a higher level. The Coalition of Essential Schools, inspired and organized by Theodore Sizer, is committed to an untracked curriculum. An example of how heterogeneous grouping (students of differing

ability) might work is a Fort Worth, Texas, class studying the *Iliad*, composed of students whose reading levels range from 4th to 12th grades. Students use books written at four levels of difficulty to study and learn together.

What Parents Can Do When a Child Is Placed in a Low Ability Group

If you think your child is not being challenged or is assigned to a class or group below his or her ability, talk with the teacher about changing the placement. If the teacher or principal is reluctant to do this, ask for a trial period in a higher group or another class, to see if your child is capable of keeping up with the pace. Check test scores each year to be sure your child is performing at grade level; if not, ask for special help. Raise questions about whether tests really measure what they say they do, whether they discriminate against those who do not have White, American, middle-class backgrounds. Discuss with school personnel whether your child's English is improving and whether language might be a factor in the placement of your child. Work with other parents to review and raise questions about the school tracking policies and practices.

4. Testing

Good tests that are properly used can help teachers plan and guide the education of a middle school student, help him or her learn more efficiently, and help parents understand their child's progress. In recent years, schools have begun to use more and more

standardized tests, and to view the scores as more of a sign of the school's educational quality. Some states have required specific scores as requirements for promotion or graduation. Those students who score well on standardized tests are considered successful; the others are labeled failures.

When student performance is measured primarily by standardized tests, the curriculum and methods of teaching may be greatly influenced, with teachers more concerned about "teaching to the test" than with working on other skills. Standardized tests are only limited measures of student achievement. They do not measure skills such as writing, reasoning, or problem solving, or the ability to ask questions or plan a scientific experiment. They do not reflect such important student traits as motivation, cooperation, or enthusiasm for learning. And such tests do not provide an indication of student potential or capacity for learning.

Some educators are experimenting with ways to use "performance based" student assessment in order to lessen schools' reliance on standardized tests. In contrast to conventional tests, these new programs are designed to measure student performance on a series of tasks that may take several weeks or months to complete. Students may work individually and in groups to frame problems, collect data, and analyze and report their results. The final product might be shared through exhibitions, portfolios, or a written report.

Parents should raise questions when it appears that test scores are the primary purpose of education. No test is totally reliable as a measure of your child's knowledge, capabilities, and progress. When your child brings home a report of test scores or you see a report in your child's school records, you should ask the teacher, principal, counselor, or psychologist what the results mean. A low score on a test does not necessarily mean that your child is a failure, or is not learning.

One of the questions parents should raise in the case of standardized or IQ tests is whether the test is the right one for your child, and whether these tests contain "cultural bias," being prepared primarily for White, middle-class, American children. If you consider them to be biased, ask that your child be excused from the testing, or be given

another test. Ideally, a child should be tested in his native language. But practically speaking, the standardized tests American public schools use are hardly ever available in languages other than English. And test makers keep them confidential so that schools may not even be able to keep a copy and translate it. At least, you can insist that placement decisions not be based on an English language test which is not an accurate measure of your child's abilities and progress.

What Parents Can Do about Incorrect Use of Tests

* Request that the school inform you of the schedule for testing, information about the tests and how the results are to be used.

* Review your child's test scores and ask for an explanation.

* Make an appointment with the teacher, psychologist, and principal to discuss any results that are not consistent with what you know about your child's abilities.

* Question any placement or grouping decision made by the school, to determine if the scores from a possibly unreliable test affected the decision. Press to see that other measures are used to determine your child's capabilities, aptitudes, and achievements. Don't accept the argument that your child will be more "comfortable" with others at their own achievement level. Children should be placed where they are challenged but can still succeed.

5. Attendance Policies

All states have laws requiring all children to attend school. Each state has a different "attendance" or "truancy" law, setting the minimum and maximum ages children are required to attend school, outlining procedures to be followed in the case of truancy and, in some states, defining a number of days of attendance required to successfully complete a school year. Local districts may have their own attendance policy as well, but it must be consistent with state law.

You should be informed about your school's attendance policy so that you know what to do when your child is absent from school. Most schools consider the following as acceptable reasons for lawful or excused absences:

- death in the family
- illness of the student
- observance of a religious holiday
- appointment with doctor, dentist, clinic, etc.
- breakdown of school bus

Be sure you understand whether you are supposed to fill out a form, send a note or present a doctor's excuse to the school when your child returns to school. Otherwise, a legitimate absence may count against your child.

Situations such as illness in the family, baby-sitting, or running necessary errands, may not be considered as "lawful" absences, but you should inform the school when your child is absent for these reasons, and make every effort to allow the child to make up the work missed. In Hispanic and some other cultures older children are expected to care for younger brothers and sisters or run the household if the mother is sick. American public schools make no allowances for these customs, because the law requires children of middle school age to attend school regularly. The laws are intended to protect children from working at an early age and missing an opportunity for a good education. Unfortunately, the result is often that a child who helps out at home in an emergency is punished by the school for nonattendance.

If a student is suspended from school, check on whether his or her absence is considered excused or unexcused. Unexcused absences may prevent a student from earning

credit or being promoted. Since days lost from school due to suspension are imposed by the school, it seems unfair to call them unexcused.

Some schools still suspend students *because* they have been truant or tardy, or they may reduce grades to punish a student for unexcused absence. These policies plus the practice of disciplinary removal (sending the student home for the day) do more harm than good. Students fall further behind in their schoolwork or may face loss of credit for the year, in some cases even if they have passing grades. Faced with this situation, many students lose all motivation to continue in school and skip almost daily. If the child is out of school with your knowledge, for reasons that are "unlawful," you may be considered responsible. In some states, the parents of truant children are brought to court, fined, and sometimes even put in jail.

If your child has a great many absences from school or is skipping school without your knowledge, the absences may be a sign of another problem: conflicts with teachers or peers, family crises, or repeated academic failure. You need to get to the bottom of this problem quickly before your child loses more valuable learning time or fails to earn credit for the year. Some schools even refer students listed as "truant" to court without checking with families to see if the reason for absence is legitimate.

Don't let this kind of misunderstanding occur in your case. Tell the school you want to know every day your child is not in school. If chronic absence is a pattern, try to find out why your child is

avoiding school. If you can work with your child's school to solve the main problem, school attendance should improve as a result.

Let the school know when your child will be absent for more than a day or two due to serious illness or a family emergency. Ask teachers to send home schoolwork that can be completed during the absence and remind school personnel that returning to school may be difficult for your child after a period of absence. Ask for their cooperation to make the student's return easier.

What Parents Can Do to Reduce Unexcused Absences

* Become informed about state law and your school's attendance policy.

* Find out what your school considers excused and unexcused absences; be sure you know what your responsibility is when your child is absent, whether you should write a note or call. Keep a record of your child's absences and the reason he/she wasn't in school.

* When your child is absent, talk to the teacher about arrangements for making up the work missed.

* Be sure the teachers and principal know that you want to be told when your child is out of school without your knowledge or permission.

* If your son or daughter is absent frequently because of chronic illness or other circumstances, discuss your situation with the teachers, counselor, and principal and ask for their assistance in making sure your middle schooler does not fall behind in his or her schoolwork.

* If the school uses suspension, withdrawal of credit or grade reduction to punish students for absence or tardiness, take action immediately to stop these unfair practices. They may be depriving your child of the right to an education.

* Take your appeal to the superintendent or the school board if the principal and teachers will not assist you. Check state law and local school board policy to determine if the disciplinary action is legal. If your appeal does not succeed,

get together with other parents to ask that the school's policy be changed so that it is in the best interests of the children's education.

6. Misclassification

Special education programs are valuable for students who truly need them, but sometimes educators make mistakes. They may classify a student as a slow learner or as handicapped who really has a different kind of learning problem. Some children may not learn by regular classroom methods, or have a learning style the teacher is not accommodating, or have limited proficiency in English. Labeling such children as handicapped and referring them to special education classes lowers their self esteem and will not help them reach their real potential in school.

Students most likely to be affected by this practice are poor and minority children, from a different cultural or language background. Hispanic and Black students (and other minorities) are over-represented in programs for the mentally retarded, learning disabled, emotionally handicapped, and speech impaired -- suggesting that some have been misclassified.

If your middle school child is classified as handicapped, the determination was probably made in elementary school. If you feel that a special education classroom is not what he or she needs, request a review of the placement and the student's educational progress. P.L. 94-142, the federal law providing education for handicapped children, requires that complete testing and

re-evaluation be done every three years. Parents should check their children's school records to see when the last review was done.

Before another round of testing, request that you be fully informed about the types of tests which will be given to your middle schooler. If a student has limited English skills, the test should be given in the child's primary language. Parents should organize to encourage the development of tests without cultural bias. Until that happens, insist that no action be taken based on a culturally biased test which favors White, middle-class children.

Evaluation of any child coming from a different cultural and language background is a very sensitive issue. It is easy to be misled into thinking that a child has a learning problem when in fact his only problem stems from the fact that he has not had the same experience and opportunities as other children.

Racial and Cultural Concerns

–Su-na, a Korean girl, never smiles or laughs in class. Her teacher concludes that she is not very intelligent and seldom calls on her for answers.

–Joe, a Native American, refuses to look at the teacher when she speaks to him. When she accuses him of being disrespectful, he remains silent with downcast eyes.

–Clarence, a Black 13-year-old, dresses and walks in a "macho" style. He does not act out in class but postures and slouches in his seat in poses he considers "cool." His teacher has written him off as a loser and a druggie.

Teachers often develop negative expectations for students based purely on their appearance or manner. Why? Because they do not conform to what many American teachers expect from bright, alert students. In their minds, a good student sits erect in his seat and follows the teacher with his eyes casually as she moves around the room, indicating attention, but not constantly staring. (A student who never averts her glance may be interpreted as arrogant or ridiculing the teacher.) The student should nod and smile at the teacher

occasionally to indicate approval and agreement. He does not blurt out answers but waves his hand enthusiastically letting the teacher know he wants to speak and, when called on, may give both factual answers and candid opinions, all in standard English.

These are American classroom expectations but they may be at odds with social standards in other cultures. In Korea, for instance, it is considered immodest for girls to show their teeth when boys are present so smiling would be inappropriate. In Native American and some Hispanic societies it is considered disrespectful to look directly at an older person or authority figure. So the two students in our example act as taught in their own cultures, but are misunderstood by their American teachers.

Our third example demonstrates typical behavior for some middle school students who "try on" different personalities, imitating dress and mannerisms of adults they see on the street and on TV. A student who sports an all black outfit with studded arm bands this week, may turn up in a white cotton jock look next week. It's all part of his attempt to discover what he is comfortable with--and to some extent show disapproving adults he is beyond their control. Outlandish dress and manners at this age are normal and usually harmless. They are not sufficient reason to label students losers or troublemakers.

Unfortunately, the impressions some teachers form of students based on their appearance or the way they speak (either

in halting English or nonstandard, Black dialect) can lead to low expectations, and degrading treatment. This may affect the student's self-concept, academic motivation, and desire to achieve. The consequences may be particularly severe for the middle schooler who is struggling with his or her identity. The reaction may be acting out in class, cutting class, or losing interest in schoolwork all together.

If your middle schooler is not achieving, complains she does not like school or is called down repeatedly for her "attitude," discuss the situation with the teacher. If you come from another country, do not speak English as the first language in your household, or represent a racial minority, you may need to raise the question of discriminatory treatment. Of course this is difficult, especially if you are unsure of your own English skills or are very angry about what is happening to your child. You may want to take a friend or advocate with you, someone with good English skills and a cool head. You may also give a copy of this handbook to the teacher. He may not be aware of the effect cultural differences have on classroom behavior. Explain your customs to the teacher. Ask what is required of your child in an American public school. Perhaps there has been a simple misunderstanding. The important thing is to talk about it together.

What Parents Can Do to End Discriminatory Treatment of Students

* Work with other parents to identify aspects of school policies, practices, and curriculum which appear to be insensitive and unfair to minority and low-income students.

* Encourage the school to address issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in the curriculum and other activities at the school.

* Insist that students with limited English skills receive assistance and attend bilingual classes where appropriate.

* Gather information on the makeup of the school staff and whether it is representative of the demographic composition of the student body.

* Insist that the school provide translators so that *all* parents can communicate with teachers and administrators about their child's progress in school.

* Question the practice of suspension and expulsion of students for trivial behavior. Urge the school to consider other forms of discipline so that students will not be deprived of their right to an education.

Further Reading about School Policies

Before It's Too Late: Dropout Prevention in the Middle Grades. **A Report by the Massachusetts Advocacy Center and the Center for Early Adolescence, July 1988, 87 pages. $9.00.**

Includes a profile of school dropouts, discussion of the policies and practices at the middle level school which may result in failure of at-risk students. Summarizes the characteristics of successful schools for young adolescents and presents alternatives which promote student success.

"Easing Hispanics and Asians into Mainstream America," by Esther Taira, *The School Administrator,* January 1989.

To help lessen culture shock in the case of Hispanic and Asian students, school personnel need to be aware of personal cultural values and attitudes, withhold judgments, and understand the impact of cultural similarities and differences on the lives of students and parents.

"Grade Retention: Making the Decision," by Carol Ascher, *DIGEST,* August 1988. ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

When a high proportion of any classroom or school fails, not only the children are responsible. Schools and communities need to be responsible for finding the necessary resources to turn their retained population into successful students.

continued on next page

Further Reading about School Policies

"Holding Students Back: A Reform that Doesn't Work," *STEPS*, June, 1986, National Coalition of Advocates for Students.

Repeating a grade is often recommended "for the child's own good." This article questions the validity of holding a child back, and argues that these policies are harming the most vulnerable students and perpetuating already existing educational inequalities.

***Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, by Jeannie Oakes, 1985, 231 pages, Yale University Press.**

The research reported in this book provides solid evidence that the assignment of students to different tracks is usually not made on objective grounds and that it leads to different and markedly unequal educational experiences. Tracking thus both reflects the class and racial inequalities of the larger society and helps to perpetuate them.

"Misuse of Standardized Testing: A Barrier to Excellence," *STEPS*, March, 1986, National Coalition of Advocates for Students.

Discusses how testing has been used as a barrier to excellence for all children and how testing programs, when used wisely, may contribute to a broader goal of making schools more responsive.

"Organizing Classes by Ability," *The Harvard Education Letter*, Volume III, Number 4, July, 1987, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

This article summarizes the arguments for and against organizing classes by ability, discusses the differences in quality of education between "high" and "low" classes, analyzes the costs and benefits of this sort of grouping, and suggests some alternatives to tracking.

"Standardized Testing: Harmful to Educational Health," by D. Monty Neill and Noe J. Medina, *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1989.

"No matter how well-crafted it is, improved assessment is not a panacea that will reform education," these authors maintain. "Advocates of reform must remain vigilant; the more insightful and powerful the means of assessment, the more damage its misuse can cause."

"Repeating a Grade: Does it Help?" *The Harvard Education Letter*, March, 1986. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Includes a discussion of the research on retention, the question of whether retention helps low-achieving children learn, and such alternatives as "ungraded" or "continuous progress" classes.

"Testing: Is There a Right Answer?" *The Harvard Education Letter*, September/October 1988, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

"With the recent increase in state- and district-mandated standardized testing, arguments about (their) purpose and value ...have become....more heated. Meanwhile, the evidence is growing that testing programs promise more than they can deliver and that an over reliance on standardized tests may, in fact, be distorting our educational system."

"Tracking and Ability Grouping: Which Way for the Middle School?" by Paul George, *Middle School Journal*, Volume 20, September 1988.

***Visions of a Better Way: A Black Appraisal of Public Schooling*. An Essay by the Committee on Policy for Racial Justice. 1989, 47 pages, Joint Center for Political Studies, 1301 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20004. $9.50 plus $2.00 postage and handling.**

This essay challenges the excuses made to rationalize or justify the failures of the public school system, and identifies areas in which progressive educational reform can be achieved.

***The Way Out: Student Exclusion Practices in Boston Middle Schools*, by Anne Wheelock. A Report by the Massachusetts Advocacy Center, November 1986, 117 pages. $9.00.**

Analyzes practices and policies in Boston's middle schools to demonstrate that the dropout problem must be addressed at the middle school level. Discusses how attendance policies, the practice of non-promotion and suspensions contribute to the alienation of students.

For the addresses of organizations which have published some of these materials, turn to page 87.

Jantzen

Resources On Middle Schools and Parent Involvement

In every section of this handbook we have mentioned books, reports, and articles which readers may wish to consult for more information about middle grade students and schools. Check with your school or local library for these publications or contact the organizations which publish them to obtain copies. The organizations listed are currently very much involved in middle school reform efforts and may have more material to share with you.

If you are unable to locate the journal or magazine articles mentioned in this report contact the National Committee for Citizens in Education.The toll-free Help Line is 1-800-NETWORK (638-9675).

Three other resources on this age group you may find helpful are

Early Adolescence: A Resource Directory, by Susan Rosenzweig and Kathleen Dunleavy, 1987, 58 pages. Center for Early Adolescence, $7.00 plus 10% shipping.

Lists organizations, religious organizations with youth divisions and periodicals for those who work with 10-15-year olds.

High Strides: The Bimonthly Report on Urban Middle Grades. Education Writers Association, 1001 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036. (202) 429-9680. Subscriptions are $40 a year.

T.E.A.M.: The Early Adolescent Magazine, T.E.A.M. Associates, Inc., PO Box 1167, Clarksville, MD 21029. (301) 992-9476. Subscriptions are $40 a year.

Organizations

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
125 N. West St.
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 549-9110
Contact: Gordon Cawelti

Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents
Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development
11 Dupont Circle, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 265-9080
Contact: Anthony Jackson, Ruby Takanishi

Center for Early Adolescence
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Suite 211, Carr Mill Mall
Carrboro, NC 27510
(919) 966-1148
Contact: Frank Loder, Judith Davidson

Center for Education for the Young Adolescent
University of Wisconsin--Patteville
1 University Plaza
Platteville, WI 53818

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Center for Research on Elementary & Middle Schools
The Johns Hopkins University
3505 N. Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21218
(301) 338-7570
Contact: Joyce Epstein

Children's Defense Fund
122 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001
(202) 628-8787
Contact: Karen Pittman

Institute for Responsive Education
605 Commonwealth Ave.
Boston, MA 02215
(617) 353-3309
Contacts: Don Davies, Owen Heleen

Institute for Urban Minority Education
ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027
(212) 678-3433
Contacts: Erwin Flaxman, Carol Ascher

Massachusetts Advocacy Center
76 Summer Street
Boston, MA 02110
(617) 357-8431
Contact: Anne Wheelock

National Coalition of Advocates for Students
100 Boylston Street, Suite 737
Boston, MA 02116
(617) 357-8507
Contact: Joan First

National Committee for Citizens in Education
10840 Little Patuxent Parkway, Suite 301
Columbia, MD 21044
(301) 997-9300; (800) NETWORK (638-9675)
Contact: Anne Henderson, Nancy Berla

National Council on Middle Level Education
National Association of Secondary School Principals
1984 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091
(703) 860-0200
Contacts: George Wilton, Santee Ruffin

National Middle School Association
4807 Evanswood Drive
PO Box 14882
Columbus, OH 43229
(614) 263-5407
Contact: Dennis Smith

National Resource Center for Middle Grades Education
College of Education
University of South Florida
Tampa, FL
(813) 944-2530

Promising Programs in Middle Schools

Accelerated Schools Model

This model views disadvantaged students as gifted and talented, and provides them with the opportunity to learn basic skills and move ahead at a faster pace than is usually expected.

For further information:
Henry Levin
Professor of Economics and Education
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305

The Comer Process

The Comer Process is now being implemented in two middle schools in New Haven and in Prince Georges County schools, MD. This model is an attempt to bridge the gap between the home and school experiences through a curriculum placing a heavy emphasis on social skills.

For further information:
James Comer
Director, School Development Program
Yale University Child Study Center
PO Box 3333
New Haven, CT 06510
(203) 785-2548

HOTS - Higher Order Thinking Skills

A program to assist disadvantaged students achieve much more than is now expected from them through the development of their higher order thinking skills.

For further information:
Stanley Pogrow, Associate Professor
HOTS Project, College of Education
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85721
(602) 621-1305

Operation SMART (Science, Mathematics, and Relevant Technology)

An out-of-school program, currently focusing on middle school-age female students, encourages girls to feel confident about and enjoy science and mathematics.

For further information:
Girls Clubs of America
30 East 33rd Street
New York, NY 10016
(212) 689-3700

Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP-Teen)

Training program for parents in improved family communication and effective parenting. Topics include understanding misbehavior, knowing yourself as a parent and your child as an individual, encouraging children's self-confidence, how to listen to children, ways to express feelings and ideas, logical-consequences discipline, how to hold a family meeting.

For further information:
American Guidance Service
PO Box 99, Publisher's Building
Circle Pines, MN 55014

continued on next page

Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS)

A research-based process to help teachers improve and increase parent involvement in the middle school. Three TIPS models have been designed in the areas of math, science, and social studies. The TIPS process can be adapted to the cultural objectives and texts of any district or school. The process outlines the parents' role in homework assignments and preparation for presentations at school.

For further information:
Joyce L. Epstein
Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools
Johns Hopkins University
3505 North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21218
(301) 338-7570

Team Accelerated Instruction

A cooperative learning curriculum, developed by the Johns Hopkins University, to accelerate learning among low mathematics achievers. Students are grouped into teaching teams and home teams, and work within groups and between teams to learn from each other.

For further information:
Steve Parsons
West Frederick Middle School
Frederick, MD 21701

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